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Augustine PANG

Singapore Management University, augustine@smu.edu.sg

Wonsun SHIN

University of Melbourne

Zijian LEW

Nanyang Technological University

Joseph B. WALTHER

Nanyang Technological University

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Building relationships through dialogic communication: organizations, stakeholders, and computer-mediated communication

Augustine Pang^a, Wonsun Shin^b, Zijian Lew^a and Joseph B. Walther^a

^aWee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore;

^bSchool of Culture and Communication, The University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

ABSTRACT

Online media are integral to daily life, and while many organizations use them to reach broad audiences, others still appear to be uncomfortable with online media because they do not understand how to maximize their potential to interact effectively with stakeholders. Numerous organizations use online media for one-way communication to disseminate information, despite the affordances of the media platforms for two-way, dialogic communication. This article draws on two dominant interpersonal theories of computer-mediated communication—social information processing theory and the hyperpersonal model—to propose dialogic strategies that organizations can use to improve their online communication with their stakeholders. We illustrate the application of these principles through three stages of relationship building: initiating/experimenting, intensifying, and integrating/bonding. The article integrates the applications within an overall dialogic communication strategy, and provides organizations and practitioners with a model with which they can engage stakeholders with dialogic methods via social media.

ARTICLE HISTORY

KEYWORDS

Dialogic communication; computer-mediated communication; organizational image; social media; organization–public relationship

Introduction

Relationship building has become a key component in the practice of organizations' public relations. Research on organization–public relationships shows that organizations that engage stakeholders and communicate with them regularly build better relationships than those that do not (Ledingham and Bruning 2000). Wilcox and Cameron (2009) describe the mutual exchanges between organizations and stakeholders as *dialogic communication*.

The emergence of the Web 2.0 – participatory websites and social network systems such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, in addition to email, online chats, and discussion lists – poses challenges to organizations' conceptualization and execution of dialogic communication. Like other means of dialogic communication with stakeholders, their management or mismanagement is closely tied to organizational image (Massey 2003), defined as the 'mental picture' that stakeholders have of an organization (Gray and Balmer 1998, 697). On the one

hand, organizations now have a far wider range of dialogic, digital communications tools at their disposal (Shin, Pang, and Kim 2015). On the other hand, there is still considerable disagreement about the utility of these platforms for meaningful dialog and their value in maintaining relationships (see Tong and Walther 2011).

Despite their awareness of the importance of online communication in cultivating relationships and a positive organizational image, research suggests that many organizations are not exploiting the full potential of the new media (Shin, Pang, and Kim 2015). Deterring them are a number of concerns, including an organization's inability to control its messages (DiStaso, McCorkindale, and Wright 2011), the difficulty in determining the scope of online audiences (Seo, Kim, and Yang 2009), the challenge of connecting effectively with stakeholders (Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton 2012), and uncertainty over possible negative word-of-mouth (Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley 2014). Amid these challenges, the over-arching question remains: What strategies can organizational practitioners use to engage online in effective conversations with the public?

The goal of this study is to provide answers to this question. We first elaborate the concept of dialogic communication and its importance in organizational image management. Then, we introduce interpersonal theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and discuss how key insights from CMC research can help organizations to develop effective dialogic communication and cultivate relationships. Based on the discussion, we provide recommendations for organizations to utilize online communication tools to achieve their communication objectives effectively.

This study is arguably one of the first to harness insights from CMC research and integrate them with studies on dialogic and strategic communication. It explains, for example, how CMC strategies like asking questions and disclosing information about oneself (Tidwell and Walther 2002) satisfy dialogic ideals, such as emphatic interpersonal interactions, as specified by Taylor and Kent (2014). In doing so, we aim to build a framework based on empirically tested theories so that organizations are able to apply it to build stronger relationships with their stakeholders.

The role of dialogic communication in relationship development and image building

As public relations practices focus more on relationship building, organizations' dialogic communication with their stakeholders has become crucial. Dialogic communication refers to 'any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions' (Kent and Taylor 1998, 325). It encompasses an organization's efforts to engage in an open, honest, and ethical relationship with its publics (Bortree and Seltzer 2009), which provides organizations with the opportunities to hear from the public and adapt to the public's needs (Hong, Yang, and Rim 2010). Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) argued that an organization's use of dialogic communication to build relationships with the public shares the same quality of an individual's dialogs in interpersonal relationships. Both processes involve interactions that involve trust and aim to develop satisfactory relationships.

Over the last two decades, developments in online media and their uses have allowed stakeholders to have a greater voice in the decision-making processes of various organizations and institutions. For instance, individuals gain influence in collective action using social media to mobilize personal social networks and activate other protesters (Bennett and Segerberg

2011). Therefore, organizations' efforts to address users' attempts to influence organizations through talk and reciprocal interaction are not only possible and advisable, but they may even forestall the potential for stakeholders to self-organize in antagonistic fashion. Online media provide an environment 'where negotiation between organizations and publics may occur' (Kent and Taylor 1998, 322). Dialogs in online media allow audiences to provide feedback on organizational practices, giving organizations opportunities to respond to the public's concerns and embrace the public's input. The interactivity of online media can facilitate the quality of organization–public conversations and generate positive outcomes such as increased trust, enhanced product knowledge, and increased profits (Sundar, Xu, and Dou 2012).

In addition to relationships at the stakeholder-organization level, dialogic communication can play an important role in developing and enhancing the organization's image. Although traditional media are useful in image management (Pang 2012), online media have been touted as the 'new virtual landscape' (Vernuccio 2014, 214) where organizations and stakeholders co-create organizational images and brand messages through dialogic communication.

Although many organizations have some sort of social media presence, research suggests that organizations do not fully utilize the interactive capabilities of online media to foster their images. Vernuccio (2014) found that global organizations are hesitant to be open or encourage active participation by stakeholders in the way they communicate their brands and images. Research also shows that organizational representatives tend to rely on one-way communication to control what messages are disseminated, and therefore do not truly interact with stakeholders online (Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton 2012; Shin, Pang, and Kim 2015). As an unfortunate result, organizations may thereby miss the opportunity to generate potentially positive organizational image outcomes that are often more effectively created with the involvement of stakeholder-side social dynamics: prior research has shown that communication organically generated by social media users creates more value for organizations than communication generated by an organization itself (Schivinski and Dabrowski 2014). People are also more likely to be persuaded to click on an organization's link when it is provided in a spontaneous, user-generated tweet than when it appears in a sponsored tweet that Twitter clearly receives payment to advertise (Wood and Burkhalter 2014). From these studies, organizations and practitioners should expect content created by stakeholders to play an important role in shaping organizational images. Therefore, as Vernuccio (2014) argues, organizations must learn to talk with their stakeholders instead of talking at them as they co-construct organizational images.

Understanding dialogic communication through CMC

We argue that research-based CMC strategies can offer valuable insights to relieve organizations' hesitance in engaging in dialogic communication with stakeholders. Given that consumers are more receptive to online messages from entities with whom they have a sense of relationship than they are to messages from mere acquaintances (van Noort, Antheunis, and van Reijmersdal 2012), building relationships online is important for organizations that want their messages to be greeted and reciprocated by stakeholders.

Among a variety of theoretical approaches to CMC, social information processing theory (SIPT; Walther 1992) and the hyperpersonal model (Walther 1996) are unique in their perspectives on how online communicators can imbue messages with both personal and

affective meaning, and those qualities distinguish these models from other prominent approaches to CMC. Both the SIPT and the hyperpersonal model are expressly based on principles of interpersonal and relational communication. These approaches, and a substantial number of empirical studies supporting them over the last two decades, place them among the most influential theoretical models regarding the effects of CMC and social media (e.g., Walther et al. 2008) in interpersonal and organizational communication (e.g. Walther 1995). Further explication of these approaches and a review of related research allow us to extract several relevant dialogic strategies that can be applied to the context of organizational-stakeholder relationship development via CMC.

Although several CMC theories were considered, others generally maintain a more traditional view that new media are insufficient for interpersonal relations. Because new media often support fewer nonverbal cue systems, other theories contend, they are unable to convey personality, emotion, or sentiments. For instance, social presence theory (see for review Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon 2003) holds that a variety of nonverbal channels are required to achieve warmth and involvement. However, considerable research has shown that this proposition is tenuous (see for review Walther 2011), and that, used effectively, people are able to express relational intimacy through text-based CMC alone (Tidwell and Walther 2002), without nonverbal channels with audio or visual cues. Media richness theory (Daft and Lengel 1986) also contends that media that transmit fewer cues are deficient; it focuses on selecting which media to use for what purpose. However, empirical support for the theory is dubious (see, e.g. Dennis and Kinney 1998), and research shows that people are able to adapt media to fulfill their social purposes regardless of channel (see, e.g. Walther, Loh, and Granka 2005). The social identification/deindividuation model of CMC effects (Reicher, Spears, and Postmes 1995) focuses exclusively on how CMC users relate to each other as members of ingroups or outgroups and not as individuals or dyads. Although these issues and questions are interesting in many contexts, they differ from the question of whether and how individuals use online media tools for interpersonal expressiveness, which SIPT and the hyperpersonal model address most directly (see for review Walther 2011).

Social information processing

The SIPT (Walther 1992) argues that people use text-based CMC in ways that make up for the absence of nonverbal cues, enabling communicators to develop impressions and interpersonal affection as strongly as they could offline. In face-to-face (FtF) communication, non-verbal cues such as kinesics, vocalics, and proxemics, or artifacts like clothes and accessories are easily observable. In CMC, they are not. Nevertheless, according to SIPT, social cues can be transmitted over written communication. Individual practitioners can develop interpersonal relations through CMC by adapting to channel limitations through more nuanced use of language content and language style, typography, and message timing.

However, SIPT also recognizes that the reliance on language and text alone in CMC, without the additional and simultaneous modalities that are available FtF, means that less information is transmitted between communicators per unit of time online than occurs offline. As a result, interpersonal relationships through CMC develop at a slower rate than FtF relationships (Walther 1995).

Overall, SIPT informs us how practitioners can build interpersonal relationships through CMC using various social cues. As public relations practices focus more on relationship

building, insights from SIPT have great potential to contribute to the literature of how organizations engage with their stakeholders over online/social media.

Hyperpersonal model

The hyperpersonal model (Walther 1996) explains how CMC users come to express more affection and liking than in similar FtF encounters. Unlike SIPT, which posits that CMC relationships can be as good as FtF ones, the hyperpersonal model examines how, under certain conditions, CMC relationships can exceed FtF relationships in relational closeness (Walther 1996). The model also describes how four communication components – senders, receivers, channel, and feedback – work together to help communicators achieve relational goals online.

When people send messages in CMC, they have greater control over what they communicate to others. Senders can construct their messages to 'portray themselves in preferential ways, emphasizing desirable characteristics and communicating in a manner that invites preferential reactions' (Walther 2011, 461). They can also omit undesirable characteristics or information that may negatively influence their self-presentations.

Receiving messages in a reduced-cues CMC context may lead to attaching added importance to desirable peculiarities, style, tone, and other information contained within the messages. As the transmitted cues tend to be favorable to the senders, receivers may idealize the senders.

The CMC channel can enhance a positive image even further. This is especially so for asynchronous forms of CMC, with which practitioners can craft messages carefully in a process of writing and editing before sending. Even in real-time CMC, there is greater control over messages than over the phone or FtF.

Feedback can be understood from a behavioral confirmation perspective, in which an individual's impression of a communication partner shapes his behavior toward that partner, which in turn influences that partner's attitude and behavior toward him. Through this reciprocal mechanism, feedback capitalizes on the initial positive self-presentation to reinforce and intensify the mutually favorable feelings that CMC communicators have of each other.

This essay began by posing the question: How can organizational practitioners utilize online media to engage in dialogic communication beyond and across media exemplars? We have argued that organizational practitioners should consider adopting insights from CMC research in order to enhance the use of online communication to cultivate relationships with stakeholders. Further translation of these insights into applications for practitioners is important. Before suggesting specific applications, however, it is important to place them in the center of a larger trajectory of organizational actions. Some of these actions precede and others follow the application of CMC to the gradual development of organizational/stakeholder relations. We model this trajectory in Figure 1, which includes (a) the articulation of the specific approach(es) to dialogic communication processes; (b) the application of media resources that can support dialogic CMC efforts; (c) the application of CMC strategies in various stages of relational development; (d) CMC tactics that further advance dialogic goals; (e) potential outcomes that may result from these applications; and finally, (f) implications for the solicitation and evaluation of feedback to further improve processes and outcomes.

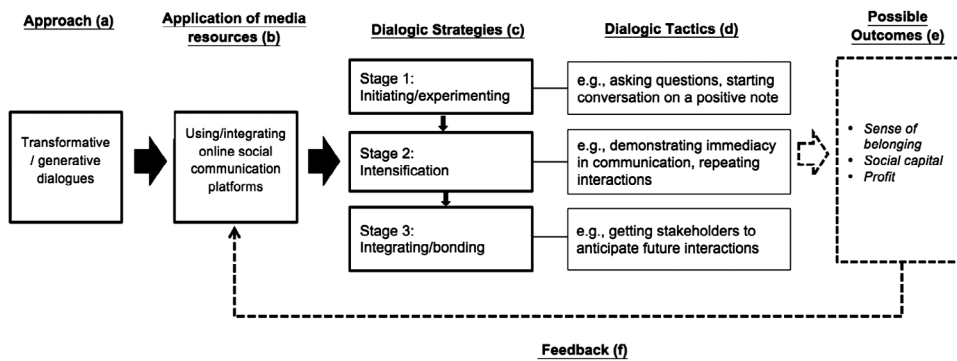


Figure 1. Trajectory in dialogic communication.

Before developing dialogic communication strategies and tactics: approach and application of media resources

Approach

The model begins by echoing the importance of a dialogic communication approach by organizational practitioners, building relationships through CMC and enabling conversations in order to 'grow virtual communities with stakeholders' (Lovejoy, Waters, and Saxton 2012, 316). Romenti, Murtarelli, and Valentini (2014) proposed four general dialogic communication strategies, any of which could, in principle, be adapted to CMC: (1) concertative dialog strategy, in which the goal is to share settings to facilitate consensus building and agreement among participants about organizational strategies; (2) framing dialog strategy, in which organizations decide on the topics they deem important for discussion 'to reinforce social prominence of their positions' (15); (3) transformative dialog strategy, where the goal is to create knowledge by encouraging participants to speak and share their thoughts; (4) generative dialog strategy, which encourages conversation in which opinions are exchanged and respected. Of the four strategies, however, Romenti, Murtarelli, and Valentini (2014) found that concertative dialog strategy was most commonly used in social media communication, followed by framing and transformative, and even more seldom, generative strategies.

Thus, this essay argues that if an organization wants to stimulate conversation with a view of building relationships, the organization should adopt the transformative/generative dialog strategies, which are interactive and aimed at engagement to build relationships (element (a) in Figure 1).

Application of media resources

As suggested in element (b) in Figure 1, once the approach is determined, organizations are faced with practical realities of how to harness their media resources most effectively. Organizations have to decide on what platforms they are able to employ for dialogic communication, such as interactive websites, or social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or others. Each platform has distinctive characteristics.

For websites, Park and Reber (2008) argued that beyond telling what they want stakeholders to know about them, organizations could further promote mutuality, trust,

satisfaction, openness, and intimacy with stakeholders by introducing to their websites dialogic features that facilitate ease of interface and the conversation with visitors. The development of Web 2.0 features facilitates the input of user-generated comments to a site. For social networks such as Facebook, beyond simply connecting with the organization by following its profile or page and then receiving news in the form of status updates from the organization, stakeholders can respond by 'liking' or posting comments that are shared with others and with the organization. These features enable organizations to share stories, engage in conversations, and consequently, build relationships with various stakeholders (Chu 2011; Lillqvist and Louhiala-Salminen 2014; Men and Tsai 2011). Microblogging sites like Twitter allow users to post short updates and repost an update from another user (called 'retweet' in Twitter) in order to share information or highlight their interest in and agreement with the issue presented in the original post. Those short updates can be indexed, shared, and spread, using such features such as hashtags and hyperlinks (Strachan 2009), fostering interaction among and between organizations and stakeholders at an extremely rapid pace (Jones 2013; Potts and Jones 2011).

Effective strategies from CMC studies for building relationships in stages

Since relationship building through dialogic communication can be examined at the interpersonal level (Taylor, Kent, and White 2001), we turn to models of relationship development for insights into organizational communication strategies. We integrate these principles to suggest how organizations can enhance their online dialogic communication.

The literature on FtF relationships identifies a number of stages of relational development (Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi 2014). We discuss three stages appropriate to the organization-stakeholder relationship: initiating/experimenting, intensification, and integrating/bonding. Each stage is associated with suggestions from the SIPT and hyperpersonal model.

Stage 1. Initiating/experimenting

In the initial stage of a conversation, communicators introduce who they are, and define the need for and the topic of the conversation. Communicators usually desire to create favorable first impressions that can help them to achieve other relational goals like affection, credibility, trust, or persuasion with their conversation partner. In FtF settings, there are numerous cues people use to achieve these impressions. The physical appearance of individuals (which may connote, for example, maturity, attentiveness, or attractiveness), the nature of the clothes and adornments they wear (e.g. professional, geeky, or Bohemian) and the physical setting (e.g. help desk, office, kiosk, or coffee shop) often set the stage for offline communication.

When people communicate online, according to SIPT, the characteristics these cues might convey – not the details themselves but the implications of the details – must be enacted conversationally (Walther 1992). Communicators do not need to say in a written message, 'I'm sitting at an expensive desk and wearing a suit.' They often try to find words that help convey their competence through other means such as demonstrating professional knowledge. At the same time, communicators also seek to reduce uncertainties in the relationship by accumulating information about their conversation partner. The process of forming impressions of one's conversation partner also tends to rely on verbal, rather than non-verbal cues, in online settings.

Studies on SIPT suggest that *question-asking* leads a conversation partner to disclose information about his or her characteristics, demeanor, and affect, helping to forge familiarity. Studies show that CMC stimulates a greater proportion of personal questions and disclosures than FtF communication does (Tidwell and Walther 2002). Moreover, the more questions one asks of a partner online, the more appropriate participants perceive the conversation to be.

Beyond these simple behaviors, there are important affective consequences. In online communication, when someone *discloses personal information or feelings* to a conversation partner, the partner attributes greater liking and intimacy to the discloser than tends to occur in FtF interactions (Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock 2013). People learn from others' self-disclosures; they discover points of similarity, and develop greater affection.

In the early stages of a conversation, communicators also want to *start conversations on a positive note*. In FtF, courtesies like giving a firm handshake, smiling, and keeping eye contact, are commonplace. In CMC, these social norms of politeness need to be expressly articulated through linguistic turns that connote as much or more affection than do non-verbal vocal and physical cues in parallel FtF interactions. These include making explicit statements of positive affection, offering encouragement, and praising the conversation partner's abilities or attributes (Walther, Loh, and Granka 2005).

Stage 2. Intensification

In the intensifying stage of relationship development, there is mutual contribution to the primary focus of discussion. Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2014) identified intensifying as one person getting to know the other better. Relationships eventually progress from the initiating/experimenting stage to an intensifying stage through *a deeper exchange of ideas* (Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi 2014). It is an axiom of communication that there are (at least) two levels of messages in any exchange that seems to be about a specific topic: the task-oriented, or instrumental level, and the socio-emotional or relational level. It is important that communicators pay attention to both levels at the same time, as relationship building is about both what is said and how things are said, taken together.

One strategy to develop the socio-emotional level is to *demonstrate immediacy in communication*. Immediacy refers to communication behaviors that enhance feelings of affection between communication partners (Mehrabian 1971), and it is an important indicator of an individual's involvement in the topic and with his or her conversation partner. In FtF situations, communicators display immediacy through non-verbal means such as keeping eye contact, nodding, and leaning forward (see for review O'Sullivan, Hunt, and Lippert 2004).

Research on CMC has shown that communicators online adapt to the medium to show immediacy in a variety of ways. For instance, communicators can use more *immediate language* to show immediacy. O'Sullivan, Hunt, and Lippert (2004) divided immediacy into two types: approachability and regard. Approachability involves behaviors that show others that one is approachable or friendly. It can be achieved through the use of more first- or second-person pronouns, writing in more colloquial language, disclosing interests and opinions similar to those held by one's conversation partner, making available personal contact information, and demonstrating one's expertise and knowledge. Regard comprises behaviors that present one's efforts to reach out and get to know others. Communication participants can put regard into practice by replying to messages, closely reading and reflecting their

understanding of messages that were sent by their communication partner, being polite with greetings and signoffs, using affective punctuation like exclamation marks and ellipses, and demonstrating individualized knowledge of one's communication partner in conversations. Personalized language can do more than making up for the lack of non-verbal cues to display immediacy. Research has shown that these communication tactics for language immediacy lead to greater perceived immediacy, competence, caring, trustworthiness, credibility, and reduced uncertainty (O'Sullivan, Hunt, and Lippert 2004).

Besides language immediacy, *chronemic immediacy* conveys a sense of closeness and reduces psychological distance between communicators. Chronemics refer to the time-related characteristics of messages, such as frequency of messages and speed of responses (Walther and Tidwell 1995). The importance of chronemics in relationship building is grounded in SIPT, which states that the rate of information exchange is slower in CMC than in FtF. Hence, sending messages at a greater frequency, with less time lag between messages, expedites the accumulation of knowledge about one's communication partner, and consequently, aids relationship building. Social norms about the timing of replies also affect immediacy perceptions, and research has shown that a shorter time lag to reply to task messages leads to greater immediacy (Walther and Tidwell 1995). Thus, practitioners can derive from chronemics the strategy of replying to messages promptly, in order to maximize immediacy.

As a general rule regarding time, SIPT proposes that building relationships in CMC requires *investing more time and exchanging a greater number of messages* than FtF. Evidence shows that more affectionate relationships develop when there is more communication between the parties involved. For instance, repeated interactions over time allow individuals to develop more interpersonal impressions (Walther 1993); socio-emotional communication increases when interaction time is unrestricted (Walther, Anderson, and Park 1994); individuals who exchange more messages build more online friendships (Peter, Valkenburg, and Schouten 2005); and individuals refine their expectations about their conversational partners with more message exchanges (Walther, DeAndrea, and Tong 2010). Hyperpersonal research has also shown that the number of words, the time spent composing messages, and frequency of message editing are related to immediacy (Walther 2007). Although the rate of information transfer is slower in CMC than when interacting FtF, adequate time must be allowed for and invested in relationship building. Practitioners can spend more cognitive and temporal resources to craft and edit messages using CMC, exploiting the asynchronicity and editability of the online medium as posited by the hyperpersonal model.

Stage 3. Integrating/bonding

Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2014) identified integrating as achieving a sort of closeness. Relational partners are willing to disclose more of themselves and have developed a 'relational identity' (115). Bonding takes place when partners experience commitment to one another. This is characterized by expressions of interest to continue a relationship and to take it further. In an integrated or bonded relationship, individuals expect future interactions with the same conversation partner.

According to SIPT and the hyperpersonal model, *anticipated future interaction* is important in building closer relationships. Walther (1994) argues that anticipated future interaction

may be inherent in FtF conversations, as people know they may recognize each other should they meet in the future. However, in CMC, recognition may be more difficult, and thus, anticipated future interaction needs to be made obvious. Empirical studies on CMC have found that when individuals anticipate future interactions, they perceive greater immediacy with, affection for, similarity to, and trust in their conversation partners (Walther 1994). They also want deeper relationships (Walther 1994), interpret messages more positively (Ramirez et al. 2007), provide more self-disclosures, and are more honest (Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino 2006). The benefits of anticipated future interaction, together with the larger communication goal of building long-lasting relationships, suggest that online communicators should explicitly offer and facilitate future contact with their partners.

The skillful negotiation of agreements, disagreements, and arguments is especially important when practitioners want to take a relationship to a closer level. When FtF, individuals may nod, avert eye contact, or fold their arms to express agreement or disagreement. In CMC, disagreements are more direct and noticeable, so communicators need to choose carefully how to express disagreement. Research finds that oblique methods of disagreement are more conducive to perceptions of friendliness online. These methods include suggesting alternatives, or praising a partner's suggestion before offering a different idea, rather than stating 'I disagree' directly (Walther, Loh, and Granka 2005). Empirical evidence also shows that individuals who expressed more agreement and who made arguments more similar with their conversation partners' opinions were deemed more attractive, and actually liked their partners better, than those who expressed explicit disagreements and direct counter-arguments (Walther et al. 2010).

Across all three stages of relationship development, SIPT and the hyperpersonal model suggest that CMC users can and do find ways, via language style, content, and chronemics, to express affection and liking as well, or better than, FtF conversation partners.

Possible outcomes and feedback

The question remains: What is in it for organizations to engage in online dialogic communication besides building relationships? This essay suggests two answers. First, it can cultivate a sense of belonging with stakeholders. Luo, Jiang, and Kulemeka (2015) found that PR practitioners regarded building communities as a strategic function of social media use. These digital communities are characterized by their interactivity, participation, user-centeredness, sharing of information and creativity, among others. Organizations' websites and social media have become the places where stakeholders go to interact not only with organizational representatives, but also other stakeholders, resulting in positive word-of-mouth in virtual communities where stakeholders feel a sense of belonging and affiliation (Keller 2013; Mason 2008). Such communities display a sense of solidarity through the use of collective pronouns and expressions of gratifications (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007), and through a strong spirit of cooperation (O'Leary and Carroll 2013). They also provide social support and allow for more social small talk, fulfilling a key function of providing information when members share expert or insider information that benefits the community (Brown, Broderick, and Lee 2007; O'Leary and Carroll 2013).

Dialogic communication via online communication platforms can also generate social capital for the organization and enhance the organization's image (Vernuccio 2014) and bottom line (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010). According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), 'social

capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (119). Coleman (1988) argues social capital can be accumulated by organizations. Social capital hinges on trust and reciprocity. Specifically, it can be seen as the 'accumulation of obligations from others according to the norm of reciprocity' (Portes 1998, 7).

At the same time, recognizing its potential benefit, and initiating efforts for greater use of online communication for dialogic communication is no panacea. If poorly conceptualized and implemented, it can lead to negative consequences that critics of dialogic communication efforts have identified in the past. For instance, Ihlen, May, and Bartlett (2014) raise concerns that organizations may ostensibly set the agenda for dialogs and direct interactions with stakeholders, but ultimately turn these efforts into tools for achieving preconceived organizational goals instead of as a means to seek multiple perspectives on various issues. Unsurprisingly, according to Ihlen, May, and Bartlett's (2014) review, stakeholders may also perceive organizations' dialogic communication plans as strategic or self-interested. Considering the potential for disingenuous efforts at dialogic communication to backfire, Theunissen and Wan Noordin (2012) argued that dialogic communication efforts must be based on a larger philosophy founded on ethics, mutual empathy, and equal partnership. Ihlen, May, and Bartlett (2014) also contend that for organizations to engage in dialogic communication effectively, they need to be willing to give up some control over the conversation and engage in sincere attempts to solicit, listen to, and understand stakeholders' inputs.

To maximize positive outcomes and minimize negative consequences for organizations and for stakeholders, practitioners are encouraged to assess carefully the outcomes of each set of dialogic communication strategies and actively solicit key stakeholders' feedback on their communication efforts. Based on the insight gained from this exercise, practitioners can revisit their online communications plans to improve dialogs and cultivate relationships yet further. This important element is depicted as element (f) in Figure 1, and represents a feedback loop that practitioners should actively implement as they progress through the stages of relationship development among participants.

Conclusion

This essay drew insights about effective online communication from dominant CMC theories focusing on interpersonal relations online in order to address organizations' hesitance in engaging with stakeholders in dialogic communication online. Next, it integrated these insights into organizational communication strategies to suggest how organizations can enhance their online dialogic communication.

The next step is to examine these strategies in an organizational context. Empirical studies grounded in organizations can add to our understanding how theory and practice integrate (Pang, Cropp, and Cameron 2006). Surveys or experiments involving consumers/stakeholder can illuminate the extent to which the dialogic communication strategies suggested in this review result in the relational outcomes and organizational images that benefit an organization. Further research can also examine whether the strengths of the association among these concepts are affected by various internal and external organizational factors such as types of the organizations, markets, targets, and culture.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Augustine Pang (PhD, University of Missouri) is an associate professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include crisis management and communication; image management and repair; media management, and corporate communications/public relations.

Wonsun Shin (PhD, University of Minnesota) is a senior lecturer in Media and Communication at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on youth and digital media, marketing communications, and consumer socialization.

Zijian Lew, B. Communication Studies (Hons), is a master of communication studies student at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research interests include assessing credibility and deception in online environments, as well as interpersonal relationships in computer-mediated communication.

Joseph B. Walther (PhD, University of Arizona) is the Wee Kim Wee Professor of Communication Studies, Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. His research focuses on computer-mediated communication in interpersonal, organizational, educational, and cross-cultural settings.

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