Dialogic Communication Through "Pinning": An Analysis of Top 10 Most-Followed Organizations' Pinterest Profiles

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ABSTRACT

Few academic studies have examined how Pinterest can be best used to connect, engage, and build relationships with target publics. The current study aims to explore how most followed brands on Pinterest build relationships through the dialogical communication framework. Broadly, through the two research questions advanced, the study contributes to the stream of research that explores the dialogic features present on social media sites. A content analysis of organizations' Pinterest profile pages and individual pins was conducted to determine the extent to which dialogic principles were present as an attempt to build relationships with their publics. The findings indicate social media do have the potential to foster relationships with organizational publics. More specifically, the study identifies Pinterest as an up-and-coming social media tool with which practitioners can utilize to cultivate relationships among their publics in a visually stimulating way. The current study can offer guidelines to those organizations that want to utilize Pinterest to better foster their relationship with target audiences, filling a gap of literature that is needed to bridge the gap between academic literature and the public relations practice.

A picture is worth 1000 words…we have all heard the cliché. Pinterest, a social media platform, aims to capitalize on this premise in an effort to connect users with images. Like each new social media platform that gains prominence, public relations practitioners seek guidance and best practices of if and how they should incorporate the tool into practice. On its platform, Pinterest has set a business guide in an effort to help direct businesses and organizations in best practices that can help establish a relationship with users (Pinterest for Business, 2014a). Sage advice includes: listening and monitoring before beginning, knowing your target audience, and being authentic. The advice is designed to inspire those who are ready to begin building relationships. However, even with guidelines in place, public relations practitioners still grapple with not only when to become involved with the space, but also how to best engage with key audiences once they are there. Because the social media tool is still in its infancy, many search for and experiment with what works and what does not. While some post tips of what doesn't work (Sixsmith, 2013), the Pinterest for Business page lists stories of organizations that have achieved success in the space. Sephora, Etsy, Allrecipes, and Petplan Insurance are just a few of company stories that are shared (Pinterest for Business, 2014b).

Few academic studies have examined how Pinterest can be best used to connect, engage, and build relationships with target publics. The current study aims to explore how most followed brands on Pinterest build relationships through the dialogical communication framework. The study seeks to determine the dialogic features present on organizations' Pinterest profile pages, as well as individual pins. In addition, the study considers the extent to which organizations employ two-way communication on Pinterest. Broadly, the study contributes to the stream of research that explores the dialogic features present on social media sites. The findings indicate social media do have the potential to foster relationships with organizational publics. More specifically, the study identifies Pinterest as an social media tool with which practitioners can utilize to cultivate relationships among their publics in a visually stimulating way.

Social Media

Social media are described as a collaborative environment focused on the exchange of content (Universal McCann, 2008). This environment is unique in the fact that the organization and their publics can be a sender and/or a receiver of information. Social media have changed the nature of everyday communications by providing a platform for individuals and organizations alike to engage with each other in a dynamic, synchronized, and multidirectional dialogue that represents varied voices. Social media can be described as a fusion between sociology and technology, altering communication from monologue (one to many) into dialog (many to many), and transforming people from content readers into publishers (Universal McCann, 2008).

Shirky (2009) states social media have "radically altered" the way groups communicate, assemble, and manage one another (p. 53). As such, division lines are fading between the content providers and content consumers as the consumer is assuming the role of information provider (Giurgiu & Barsan, 2008). Social media applications include social networking sites, video sharing sites, blogs, microblogs, virtual communities, massively-multiplayer online games, and instant messaging (Bulik, 2008). Furthermore, social media sites can include virtual bulletin boards where images can be posted such as Pinterest (Falk, 2012).

In addition to having social media tools, it is important for an organization to strategically place additional social media platforms into their communication strategy. One way to build these platforms into the mix is to create a synergy among the social media tools by making sure links to all available social media networks are easily found and accessible on a variety of channels. Cromity (2012) speaks to the by-product of adopting social media stating it can "help to enhance user experience which can have a ripple effect of strengthening branding, extending communication, improving work flow, and keeping users connected" (p. 31). He also argues social media tools can help facilitate building sustainable user communities, which is a huge part of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and their key publics.

Pinterest

Co-founded by Ben Silbermann, Evan Sharp, and Paul Sciarra in March 2010, Pinterest, a new social media tool, emerged (Pinterest, 2013). In just its few short years since inception the social bookmarking site has continued to gain popularity. "Pinterest emerged as a one of the breakout stars in social media for 2012, boasting the largest year-over-year increase in both unique audience and time spent of any social network across PC, mobile web and apps" (Nielsen, 2012).

Pinterest was designed to be a digital bulletin board. The premise of the social media tool is to share images. Users can "pin" images to their virtual boards for sharing with others. Pinterest allows users to organize boards by categories by naming each board individually. Others may follow as many individual boards as they like or may follow the entire account and all of the pins within that account. Additionally already existing pins can be "liked," "commented on," or "repined" by other users.

Pinning content for a business or organization can be a wonderful public relations tool. Pinterest photos automatically link back the source of the pinned photo. This key function of driving users back to the organizations website or blog can be an indispensable asset to the public relations practitioners toolbox. Chandler (2012) points out, "By pinning each new blog post, you add links back to your blog, which can lead to increased traffic" (para. 8). Chandler also notes how users can add descriptions to each photo, which could, in turn, improve the search engine optimization.

As Pinterest continues to grow in popularity, public relations practitioners are beginning to seek ways to integrate the social media site into their campaigns and programs. Although it is better suited for some industries over others, Walter (2013) says no one should rule it out. "Although it's known for being the site of choice for the lifestyle and fashion industries, Pinterest can help all industries find a new audience and connect with its fans through images" (Walter, 2013, para. 3).

Peregrin (2012) argues in order for an organization to become a successful Pinterest user, one must provide value to those who are engaging with the company or brand instead of simply self-promoting. Similar to other social media sites, Pinterest users need to take caution of only pushing one-way information. Public relations is meant to build mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and the publics and part of doing so requires two-way communication. Walter (2013) emphasizes, "Pinterest encourages conversations rather than broadcasts. It's fine to pin up plenty of your own content, but if you want to build a loyal following, be sure to re-pin images, like, and follow back" (para. 8). Others argue Pinterest can be a way to humanize the company and the social media campaign. Ray (2012) states, "Businesses need to understand that social media shouldn't be used for direct marketing, but to engage followers and build relationships with them" (para. 22).

Measurement of Pinterest

Many social media users, particularly businesses, are concerned with how the social media tools they implement are leading back to the company's bottom line. In the past, organizations have not embraced Pinterest due to the lack of good analytic tools (Drell, 2012). In an effort to help alleviate the problem, Pinterest took it upon themselves to supply organizations web analytics to help shed insight into how users are engaging with the pins that originate from the organization's website. According to Tao (2013), "You'll get information about how many people have pinned from your site, how many people have seen these pins, and how many people visited your site from Pinterest" (para. 3). Additionally, Tao points out that analytics can also populate what was the most repined and clicked in order to see what is popular.

Dialogic Communication

One of the fundamental functions of public relations is to build strategic relationships with key stakeholders. At the core of the relationship between the organization and their stakeholders is two-way communication. Public relations practitioners are charged with managing the communication between the organization and their publics in order to cultivate healthy relationships (Ledingham, 2003; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested a dialogic communication approach to the process of relationship building between an organization and their publics. They defined the approach as "any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325). They stated the dialogic approach lends itself to a "communicative" orientation where both parties seek understanding of the other and will continue the conversational exchange until both parties are satisfied (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Buber's (1982) research views the dialogic approach as cooperative where openness, honesty, and respect are the center of the relationship. Because of the emphasis on open communication that is cooperative and negotiated, the dialogic approach to building relationships with publics has been considered an especially ethical approach to conducting public relations (Pearson, 1989).

Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested facilitating a dialogic approach to relationship building could be achieved online for organizations and their publics. They stated the online environment provides practitioners an opportunity "to create dynamic and lasting relationships with publics" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 326). In order for an organization to foster relationships with their publics, Kent and Taylor (1998) advised organizations to strategically design their websites. The scholars identified five principles of strategic website design that organizations could implement to promote the dialogic communication approach to relationship building. These principles include (1) ease of interface, (2) usefulness of information, (3) conservation of visitors, (4) generation of return visits, and (5) dialogic loop. The five principles as defined by Kent and Taylor (1998) are described below:

Ease of interface. The ease of interface principle states sites should be easy to use and navigate. Further, Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested sites focus on content as opposed to graphics as graphics may take considerable time to load. They also point out graphics may not be as informational as content furthering their suggestion of minimal graphics.

Usefulness of information. Organization websites should strive to be the go-to place for their publics to get information pertaining to the organization. Based on this, the usefulness of information principle considers that organization websites should provide valuable information that is relevant to their publics and information that aligns with their publics' interests, values, and concerns (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Moreover, the information should satisfy the needs of their publics.

Conservation of visitors. The third principle, conservation of visitors, is based on the notion users should be motivated to stay on the site. Kent and Taylor (1998) suggested organizations minimize the use of third-party links (e.g., advertisements) that might take users away from the organizations' site. Website visitors are to be valued; they are coming to a site for what the site offers and in most cases not to "shop for other sites." Once a visitor leaves the site through another link he or she may never come back. The goal is to keep visitors on the organization's site; thus, the site should be "interesting, informative and valuable" to organization publics (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 330).

Generation of return visits. The generation of return visits principle considers the importance of repeat visitors and suggests users should be inclined to return to the site on several occasions over time. Thus, Kent and Taylor (1998) emphasize content needs to be updated regularly by the organization, as well as their publics, in order for visitors to have a reason to return to the site.

Dialogic loop. The last principle, dialogic loop, specifically focuses on the unique opportunity an online environment offers – the feedback loop. According to Kent and Taylor (1998) public relations practitioners can embed the feedback loop in the tactic itself online, which allows publics to directly communicate to the organization. In turn, this allows organizations to directly message to the public's questions, concerns, or problems. Kent and Taylor (1998) assert organizations need to make sure someone from the organization is dedicated and well-trained to respond to publics' online inquiries.

Studies Incorporating Dialogue and the Web

A stream of research has considered the potential of the dialogic approach to relationship building via an organizations' website (Callison, 2003; Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 2000; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 2003; Park & Reber, 2008; Stoner, 2004; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001; Taylor & White, 2003). Researchers have examined a variety of industries including Fortune 500 Company websites, activist websites, community college websites, and charity websites. In general, researchers found organization websites were employing several features of dialogic communication

in that they were easy to use, informative, and encouraged users to stay on the site and to return to the site. However, an overwhelming majority found organization websites lacked commitment to provide feedback through the dialogic loop, thus missing out on the relationship building opportunities afforded by the online environment and a key element to the public relations practice.

Recent scholars have demonstrated applying Kent and Taylor's dialogic principles to organizational websites is a fruitful method to determine how these sites build relationships with publics (Callison, 2003; Esrock & Leichty, 1998, 2000; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 2003; Kent, Park & Reber, 2008; Stoner, 2004; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001; Taylor & White, 2003). Since organizational social media applications are similar to organizational websites in that both are online and both are promoted as relationship-building tools, a limited number of studies have considered how social media tools foster online relationship building.

Bortree and Seltzer (2009) analyzed environmental advocacy groups' Facebook pages to determine the dialogic strategies at work on advocacy groups' profile. Given a purposive sample of 50 environmental advocacy Facebook pages, the researchers found the advocacy groups were using usefulness of information, ease of use, and conservation of visits with regard to dialogic strategies. Additionally, the researchers found the advocacy groups were not using generation of return visits or the dialogic loop strategies. The researchers concluded the groups have great potential to increase the dialogic strategies employed by the environmental advocacy groups on Facebook as an attempt to build relations with publics.

Another study considered how Fortune 500 companies facilitated dialogic communication on company Twitter accounts (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). The researchers' content analyzed 93 Fortune 500 companies Twitter accounts and found companies with dialogic tendencies used the conservation of visitors principle more but used the generation of return visits principle less than companies that did not have dialogic tendencies. Again, the researchers concluded Fortune 500 companies can increase dialogic communication on Twitter accounts significantly in order to foster relationships with their publics.

Even though scholars are beginning to explore the dialogic tendencies of social media through particular social media tools, exploration of the dialogic capabilities of Pinterest has yet to be examined to the researchers' knowledge. This study takes the first step in determining the dialogic relationship building strategies employed on Pinterest by the top 10 most-followed organizations. Thus, the research questions guiding this study were:

> **RQ1: Which dialogic features are present on an organization's Pinterest profile page and individual pins?**
>
> **RQ2: To what extent do organizations employ two-way communication on Pinterest?**

METHODOLOGY

A content analysis of organizations' Pinterest profile pages and individual pins was conducted to determine the extent to which dialogic principles were present as an attempt to build relationships with its publics. The top 10 most-followed organizations on Pinterest were used in the analysis. The organizations were identified from a list provided by Mashable (2012). The list included a variety of organizations including publishing, entertainment, retail, fashion, food, event planning, and news. The following table lists the organizations and the number of followers analyzed in this study:

Table 1: Organizations and Number of Followers

Organization	Number of Followers
Perfect Palette	244,163
Real Simple	34,995
The Beauty Department	29,706
HGTV	18,122
Apartment Therapy	17,066
Kate Spade New York	16,847
Better Homes and Gardens	15,859
Whole Foods	14,738
West Elm	11,828
Mashable	11,546

Operationalization of Dialogic Features

A modified codebook was created based on Kent and Taylor's (1998) operationalization of the dialogic principles associated with online relationship building. The codebook was modified so it would be applicable to Pinterest. Given that organizations have minimal control over the features available on Pinterest, the ease of interface principle was eliminated in this analysis. Past research examining dialogic communication on social media have also eliminated the ease of interface principle given that organizations do not control features present on the interface (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). The following details how the remaining four features of dialogic principles were operationalized:

Usefulness of Information

The dialogic principle of usefulness of information seeks to provide information of interest to its users, who not only aligns with their needs, wants, and concerns, but also satisfies their curiosity. Features of Pinterest that facilitate this principle include: visual identifier of organization, organization description, organization location, informative board names, fitting board descriptions, suitable pins based on board topics, quality photos, and informative pin captions. Given the high volume of pins, coders checked 25% of the total pins of a randomly selected board.

Several features of this principle focus on the names and descriptions of the boards

because the boards are central to an organization's presence on Pinterest, if they are not clearly identified users will not have accurate information. Further, if the photos used on the boards are not of high quality and if the captions accompanying the photos do not reflect the picture topics, user may be further misinformed.

Conservation of Visitors

Conservation of visitors seeks to motivate users to stay on the site. Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) argued an organization's other social networking sites are part of the organization's extended social networking presence and should be included as part of the conservation of visitors principle. Given this, the current study considered links to an organization's website, Facebook account, and Twitter account as features of this principle.

Further, the conservation of visitors principle considers the currency of updates to the site as an attempt to motivate users to stay on the site. The current study considers an organization attempting to keep users on the site if they had an activity on their Pinterest account within the last seven days. The profile was coded as "present" if activity had occurred within the last seven days. Activity could range from creating a board, creating a pin, commenting on a pin, or "repining."

Generation of Return Visits

Understanding the importance of repeat visitors is the underpinning of the generation of return visits principle as time and repeated exposure is necessary for relationships to form (Taylor, et al., 2001). The following elements were identified as features encouraging users to return: explicit statement that invites users to return (i.e., call to action) and providing users with downloadable information (e.g., pin lead to the organization website/blog). Coders randomly selected five pins within a board to check the availability of information to download.

Dialogic Loop

The final principle – dialogic loop – is concerned with the discussion taking place between the organization and their users online. The current study operationalized the dialogic loop principle as an opportunity for users to comment, opportunity for users to "like" pins, and an opportunity for users to engage with pins through repining, posting, playing games, voting on pictures, and participating in contests.

Additionally, assessing organization response time and response content has been considered an important feature of the dialogic loop principle (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). For the current study, an organization was considered "responsive" if it responded to a user's inquiry within five days. Additionally, an organization was considered "dialogic" if it response to a user's inquiry was appropriate based on the topic.

Coding Procedures

A code sheet was created to analyze the organizations' profile page and individual pins on Pinterest. The original code sheet was tested and refined to be applicable for use on Pinterest. Several items were either removed or reworded while other items were added to refine the codebook. Four trained coders coded the items as either present or absent on the organizations' Pinterest page. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Scott's Pi (Holsti, 1969); reliability coefficients ranged from 0.71 to 0.96.

RESULTS

RQ1 asked which dialogic features were present on an organization's Pinterest profile page and individual pins. As discussed by Taylor et al. (2001) and Kent et al. (2003) frequency counts of each item were tabulated to determine the extent to which dialogic features were present. In addition, a composite "index score" was calculated for each principle, which averaged the items in each principle to serve as comparison points.

The usefulness of information principle scored the highest at 84% in regards to the dialogic features on organizations' Pinterest profile pages and individual pins. All organizations reviewed used a visual identifier of the organization, whether it was the name of the organization or their logo. Additionally, all companies used informative board names, included suitable pins based on board topics, posted quality photographs and constructed informative pin captions. In addition, 90% of the organizations reviewed included a company description while 80% revealed company location. However, the organizations reviewed did not include board descriptions.

The second highest principle – dialogic loop – had an index score of 75% regarding the dialogic features present on organizations Pinterest accounts. All of the top 10 most-followed organizations that were reviewed provided users the ability to comment on the organization's pins while also letting users "like" the pins. Additionally, all of the organizations reviewed provided opportunities for users to engage with their pins by allowing users to do one or more of the following: repin to their Pinterest accounts, post the information to other social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, play games, vote on pins, or participate in contests.

Conservation of visitors had an index score of 73%. All 10 organizations included a link to their website while almost all (90%) included links to a Twitter account. Additionally, all 10 organizations had been active on their Pinterest accounts within the last week. However, none of the organizations in the current study linked back to a Facebook account from the Pinterest profile.

Lastly, the generation of return visits had the lowest index score of 50%. Almost all organizations (90%) had downloadable information for users to access. However, only 10% of the organizations reviewed had an explicit statement that invited users to return.

RQ2 considered the extent to which organizations employ two-way communication on Pinterest. All 10 of the organizations reviewed did not respond to users inquiries within five days of the posts. Given that organizations did not respond to the inquiries, coding the appropriateness of the response did not occur.

DISCUSSION

Through Pinterest, organizations are utilizing a variety of dialogic tools to build relationships with their publics. The organizations studied are supplying useful information, providing opportunities to engage through dialogic communication, and encouraging users to stay on the site. However, these same organizations seem to be lacking in encouraging users to come back to their profile pages.

Even though the dialogic loop principle scored the second highest behind usefulness of information principle, organizations do not seem to be using the opportunity to truly engage with publics via Pinterest. The framework of Pinterest allows users to comment and "like" pins as well as to participate in games, contests, and repinning activities; therefore, Pinterest itself inherently has dialogic features built in for organizations to take advantage of to connect to publics. However, all of the 10 organizations analyzed, none took this engagement a step further to respond or comment to users questions, inquiries, etc. This is unfortunate because users are posting questions/comments and anticipating organizations to respond but organizations don't seem to be utilizing this feature. An organization can set themselves apart and truly attempt to build relationships with their publics if it takes advantage of the dialogic feedback features present on Pinterest.

Overall, organizations are working hard to keep users on the collective sites through links to the organizations' homepages and Twitter accounts. It is encouraging that these organizations are pushing a variety of social platforms in order to stay connected. In a world that now operates in a 24/7 timeframe, other social sites could also be used to build mutually beneficial relationships. This is a way to build synergy for an organization, and organizations that don't take advantage of this opportunity are missing out. As Cromity (2012) pointed out, adopting social media can enhance user experience, which can have a positive ripple effect on a variety of communication strategies.

Organizations scored the lowest on generation of return visits, which somewhat aligns with past studies looking at dialogic features on social media (Bortree & Seltzer (2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Mainly, organizations are lacking in explicitly inviting users to return. Organizations can work on creating messaging around "call to action" invites via Pinterest accounts, and by doing so, will be taking further steps to build relations with their publics. Finally, it may be plausible that Pinterest is a relatively new phenomenon so organizations may require a bit more time to learn how to encourage return visits.

CONCLUSION

Organizations continue to provide information, attempt to keep target publics on the social media sites and at times attempt to encourage those users to return. Interestingly, organizations are simply using the tools inherent on Pinterest to encourage engagement but organizations are doing a very poor job in fostering dialogue. As an avid Pinterest user myself, I find it disheartening organizations would not use Pinterest as another way to build relationships and foster dialogue with brand advocates and key publics. This study provides some deeper understanding into the Pinterest tool and how to improve in the future. Organizations can truly work on creating a dialogue through providing feedback.

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