Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Global Politics and Socio-Humanities
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2026.ZJU35435

The Impact of Public-Organization Social Media Interactions on Public Perceptions and Behaviors Toward the Organization

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Abstract. With the development of social media, it has become an essential platform for two-way communication between the public and organizations. However, the existing literature has mainly focused on the organization's one-way communication strategies for disseminating content. On the contrary, the "interaction" as a two-way communication process is not well explored. This study aims to explore the role of the interaction between the public and the organization on social media in terms of the intensity of the interaction and the quality of the interaction in shaping the perception of the transparency of the organization and, ultimately, the perception of the organization and the behavior of the public in the form of word-of-mouth communication and crisis resilience. The methodology employed in the present study is a mixed-methods approach, which includes content analysis to collect data, a questionnaire survey using the time-lagged approach, and, finally, data analysis using the structural equation model. The study shows that high-quality, high-intensity social media interactions function as a behavioral signal of organizational transparency, thereby enhancing perceived legitimacy and trust and increasing the spread of positive word-of-mouth and resistance intentions among the public in crisis. The results of the present study will help unveil the deeper value of interaction between the public and organizations on social media.

Keywords: Social Media Interaction, Organization–Public Relationship, Perceived Transparency, Organizational Legitimacy, User Behavioral Intention

1. Introduction

With the development of social media as a means of communication, the patterns of communication between organizations (corporate bodies, non-profit organizations, and government bodies) and the public have been fundamentally altered. The dominant "one-to-many" communication pattern is gradually giving way to "many-to-many" interaction. Previous studies have concentrated on the impact of the quality and quantity of organizational messages on the public's attitude without considering the role of "interaction" as a vital social dimension. In reality, the public is not only interested in "what the organization says," but also in "how the organization responds" and "the quality of the interaction."

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In contemporary society, though many organizations have established social media presence, their patterns of interaction are mostly shallow, limited to replying with emojis or using standardized customer service responses, or simply remaining silent in response to the public's concerns. Not only does such interaction fail to foster trust, but it could also reinforce the public's negative perceptions. Thus, an examination of the channels by which "interaction" affects public psychology and behavior has important practical implications.

The present study argues that the interaction between the public and organizations is not only a process of exchanging information but also a process of generating "perceived transparency." When organizations interact with the public through social media in a sincere, timely, and exhaustive manner, the public will perceive the organization as having transparency. Such perceived transparency reduces uncertainty and increases the public's perceptions of legitimacy and emotional identification with the organization, eventually motivating behavior in the organization's favor. The present study will develop a theoretical model of "interaction—transparency—cognition and behavior." It aims to open the "black box" of the influence mechanisms of social media interaction.

2. Literature review

2.1. Organization – public social media interaction

In the early days of public relations theory, the concept of "dialogic communication" was proposed by Kelleher [1].

Dialogic communication is a concept that argues that organizations need to exhibit the characteristics of "two-way, interactive, and authentic" communication in their social media interactions with the public, rather than merely transmitting information in a unidirectional manner. Extending this line of inquiry, Jiang, Luo, and Kulemeka [2] demonstrated that social presence—the sense of human warmth and sociability conveyed through digital interaction—serves as a critical mechanism through which dialogic communication fosters public engagement. Their findings suggest that interaction quality cannot be reduced to information exchange alone; it must also convey social presence to be effective. One aspect of dialogic communication is the dialogic loop, in which the organization does not merely communicate information to the public but also responds to the public's information queries or comments in a genuine manner.

Researchers have argued that social media provides an opportunity for organizations to achieve the dialogic loop; however, the existing body of research has treated interaction as a medium characteristic or a strategy adopted by the organization rather than a variable to be measured in depth. In the current research, interaction has been conceptualized as a two-dimensional variable: interaction intensity and interaction quality. Interaction quality has also been considered a prerequisite for developing high-quality relationships.

2.2. Transparency theory

Transparency is one of the most fundamental concepts in organizational communication. Rawlins [3] defined transparency as "the intentional disclosure of relevant information by an organization to the intended audiences, and such disclosure is sufficient, accurate, timely, sincere, and credible." Building on this foundational work, Rawlins [4] further developed a stakeholder-based measurement of organizational transparency, identifying key dimensions including overall transparency, participation, substantial information, and accountability. This multi-dimensional operationalization underscores that transparency is not a unidimensional construct but a composite perception formed

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through various organizational behaviors—including, as this paper argues, interactive responsiveness on social media. In the context of social media, transparency is not just a statement by the organization anymore; it is evidenced by the organization's "behavior." When the organization "responds to criticism in the comment section or confesses to its mistake," the "procedural transparency" is more influential than the organization "issuing financial reports or press releases."

2.3. Public perception and behavior

2.3.1. Social exchange theory

Interpersonal interaction is fundamentally a rational exchange behavior. When people decide whether or not to maintain a relationship, they compare the "benefits" of the relationship to the "costs" of the relationship. When the benefits of a relationship (such as trust and identification) outweigh its costs (such as time and effort), people tend to maintain it and respond positively.

2.3.2. Signaling theory

In situations of information asymmetry, a party must send "signals" to another party to communicate the qualities of the first party that are not directly observable. The "signal" is effective if it has a high "cost" and is "observable."

Public perception generally encompasses perceptions of organizational legitimacy (the idea that the organization's existence and operations are justified) and affective trust (an emotional attachment to the organization). These two types of public perception are direct antecedents of public behavior. At the behavioral level, this research focuses on two types of public behavior: positive word-of-mouth behavior and crisis support intention.

2.4. Research gap

The existing research literature has often attempted to establish a direct relationship between "interaction" and "cognition," but the underlying psychological processes have been overlooked. Though a few researchers have emphasized the need to examine the concept of transparency, none have used "interaction quality" as a behavioral indicator of transparency.

3. Theoretical framework and conceptual model

3.1. Reconceptualizing interaction in social media contexts

Building upon Kelleher's [1] foundational theories of dialogic communication, this paper develops a more nuanced and granular theoretical framework for understanding social media interaction. Instead of viewing interaction as a homogenous phenomenon or a channel attribute, interaction will be conceptualized as a two-dimensional framework composed of interaction intensity and interaction quality.

Interaction intensity is the number and frequency of interactions between an organization and its stakeholders. The presence of interaction intensity indicates that an organization is actively engaging with its stakeholders. While interaction intensity provides a valuable perspective on social media interaction, its theoretical value is limited, as a high level of interaction intensity may result from excessive automation or a lack of sincerity.

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Unlike interaction intensity, interaction quality concerns the substance of interaction. Using the principles of dialogic communication, interaction quality can be described as follows: first, timely feedback; second, personalization of content, indicating the awareness of the speaker's identity; third, information value, reflecting an organization's expertise; and fourth, emotional quality, promoting the development of interpersonal relationships.

Theoretically, both dimensions are interlinked. If there's no quality but the intensity, then all you have is noise; on the other hand, if there is no intensity but the quality, then the effects produced cannot have any impact at all.

3.2. The transparency mechanism: from disclosure to demonstration

As stated in the traditional theories of transparency put forth by Rawlins [3], the main role of communication here is information disclosure, which refers to conveying accurate and appropriate information to the intended recipient. However, when applied to social media, a different conceptualization of this idea is needed. What we suggest is that, in the context of interaction, the notion of transparency needs to go beyond mere information disclosure.

This change in theoretical understanding has profound implications. The theory of transparency through information disclosure implies that organizations can dictate when and what kinds of information they choose to communicate. This type of transparency is essentially a one-way street. However, procedural transparency arises from actions rather than information disclosures. An organization's responsiveness in answering questions and responding to criticism, as well as to any events that arise, is how it demonstrates procedural transparency. When an organization demonstrates high levels of interaction, it is exhibiting transparency.

The concept of procedural transparency refers to transparency arising from organizational actions rather than from disclosures. Each response, each recognition of an issue raised by the user, each instance of responsiveness is a behavioral cue indicating that the organization will subject itself to public scrutiny.

From a theoretical perspective, this means that interaction frequency and quality can be considered behavioral cues for transparency. Transparency is not assumed by the organization's commitment to transparency alone, but by its observable interaction behavior with the public.

3.3. The cognitive pathway: legitimacy and affective trust

In light of the connection between interaction and transparency established, it is necessary to define the cognitive mechanisms by which transparency produces positive public outcomes. For this purpose, two constructs are distinguished: organizational legitimacy and affective trust.

Organizational legitimacy is defined, according to Suchman [5], as a generalized belief in the acceptability of the activities carried out by the organization. Organizational transparency affects the legitimacy through a rational theory of procedural justice. By being willing to interact openly and responsively with its constituents, the organization shows that it respects their rights and is ready to hear and consider their demands. By being responsive to such demands, organizations are more likely to be considered normatively legitimate since they follow normative boundaries.

Contrary to organizational legitimacy, affective trust operates using emotional mechanisms. Following Rempel et al. [6], Affective trust is a feeling of attachment to the other person that results from one's conviction in the other's benevolence, reliability, and responsiveness. Thus, in interactions on social media platforms, when communication is personalized and meaningful, the organization indicates its care for personal relationships, not just transactions. In this way, affective

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trust can be formed. The theoretical distinction between legitimacy and affective trust is crucial. Legitimacy provides the cognitive foundation for accepting an organization's role and authority; affective trust provides the emotional foundation for loyalty and advocacy. Both are necessary for the full range of positive public behaviors.

3.4. Behavioral outcomes: word-of-mouth and crisis resilience

The key theoretical issue is how the cognitive-affective changes brought by interaction transparency translate into overt behavioral intentions. This paper specifically targets two relevant behavioral intentions in the social media domain: positive word-of-mouth intention and crisis resistance intention.

Positive word-of-mouth intention denotes the tendency of the public to recommend, defend, and speak positively of the organization within their social networks. From a theoretical perspective, word-of-mouth is driven by perceptions of legitimacy (i.e., people tend to recommend organizations they consider proper and legitimate) and affective trust (people will promote organizations they feel an emotional bond with). In the social media ecosystem, word-of-mouth effects can be exponentially amplified, with positive recommendations spreading rapidly across interconnected user networks.

Crisis resistance intention, on the other hand, is the public's commitment to continue supporting the organization despite crises and failures. Based on social exchange and relationship development theories, when the organization engages in high-quality interactions with its publics, it establishes a store of positive feelings that can protect it from negative outcomes. According to attribution theory, if the organization can interact with the public effectively and transparently, any failures or crises will be considered situational rather than dispositional.

The concept of uncertainty reduction can explain the connection between transparency and crisis resistance from a theoretical perspective. A transparent communication process reduces ambiguity about the organization's motivations and skills. In a crisis, the reduced ambiguity means people will analyze the situation through trust, not doubt.

3.5. The signaling logic of interaction

The entire theoretical framework may be unified under the notion of signaling theory. Connelly et al. [7], In their comprehensive review of signaling theory's evolution, they reaffirm that signal cost remains the foundational criterion for signal credibility—a principle that directly applies to organizational social media interaction, where sustained, genuine engagement represents a costly behavioral investment that is difficult for opaque organizations to sustain. Given the nature of the environment in which information asymmetry exists—the connection between an organization and its public—the organization needs to signal certain qualities that cannot be observed. Credibility is attained when signals are costly to produce and resistant to imitation.

Interaction via high-quality social media is costly. It demands organizational investments of time and attention and is hard to counterfeit. An organization without a true dedication to transparency and public engagement cannot sustain interaction over time. Hence, the public would consider interaction an authentic signal of organizational qualities, including transparency and public responsiveness.

The notion of signaling provides the rationale for interaction being a stronger form of transparency than disclosure. While disclosure can be used as part of strategic communication, interaction is inherently costly. This is because interaction entails continuous communication and responds to external inquiries and criticism.

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3.6. Moderating conditions and boundary considerations

A proper theoretical discussion will take into account boundary conditions and factors that may influence the proposed relationships. Some of these include the following.

First, organizational type could act as a moderator between interaction and transparency. There are likely to be differences in the expectations the public has of each type of organization regarding interaction. Government entities are typically held to higher standards of transparency than private-sector organizations, where service delivery often takes precedence over procedural openness.

Second, the sensitivity of the issue at hand may influence the interaction's effects. If the matter involves controversial or sensitive information, the role of interaction in signaling organizational transparency becomes even more pronounced.

Third, platform-related issues could influence interactions. Social media platforms offer varied modes of interaction along with varying expectations among their audiences. Interaction through Twitter, which offers an open, real-time format characterized by short messages, may mean something different from interaction in a brand-run community forum.

Fourth, audience heterogeneity needs to be considered theoretically. It is not true that all publics would pay equal attention to interaction quality. Some publics will be happy to receive even the most basic forms of acknowledgment, while others may scrutinize each interaction to gauge its depth.

3.7. Theoretical propositions

The above theoretical analysis leads to the following set of formal propositions, which state the anticipated relationships among constructs. It must be noted that the following propositions are stated solely theoretically and are not empirically operationalized yet.

Proposition 1 (Social Media Interaction Intensity/Quality and Organizational Transparency Relationship): There is a positive correlation between the organization's social media interaction intensity and quality and its organizational transparency. The mechanism underlying this relationship is believed to be a demonstrative one, in which interaction is seen as behavior that evidences organizational transparency.

Proposition 2 (Organizational Transparency and Legitimacy Relationship): There is a positive correlation between organizational transparency and organizational legitimacy. The mechanism underlying this relationship is procedural fairness, in which interaction is seen as respecting public voice and being accountable for it.

Proposition 3 (Transparency-Trust Relationship): Higher perceived levels of organizational transparency are positively associated with greater affective trust among stakeholders. This link is expected to occur via the signaling process through which emotional interaction indicates organizational beneficence.

Proposition 4 (Legitimacy-Behavior Relationship): Increased perceptions of organizational legitimacy are positively related to increased intentions for word-of-mouth and crisis resistance. Legitimacy constitutes the normative basis for public advocacy and support.

Proposition 5 (Trust-Behavior Relationship): Increased levels of affective trust perceptions are positively related to increased levels of word-of-mouth intentions and crisis resistance intentions. Affective trust is the emotional basis for loyalty and advocacy.

Proposition 6 (Mediation): Social media interactions (quality and intensity) are positively related to public behavior intentions (word-of-mouth and crisis resistance), where perceptions of

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transparency partially mediate such relationships, then by legitimacy, and finally by affective trust. Mediation functions as the theoretical "black box" that our study seeks to unpack.

Proposition 7 (Credibility of Signaling): The effects suggested in Propositions 1-6 are based on the notion of signaling, in which interaction quality and intensity become credible signals due to their costs and difficulty of being faked. Credibility enables the perception of transparency.

Proposition 8 (Moderator Variables): The extent of the relationships that have been hypothesized is subject to moderation by organizational context, degree of issue sensitivity, communication platform attributes, and audience composition differences.

4. Theoretical contributions and implications

4.1. Revisiting dialogic communication theory

Through this theoretical framework, the concept of dialogic communication is further elaborated to delineate the sequential processes through which its constituent elements drive organizational outcomes. Whereas other scholars, including Kelleher [1], have provided a rationale for the use of dialogic communication, the process by which dialogue results in public perception has not yet been sufficiently explained. By incorporating perceived transparency as a mediating variable, this theory offers a more comprehensive explanation of the process involved.

4.2. Advancing transparency theory for interactive environments

The separation of transparency theory into disclosure and demonstration constitutes a theoretical advancement in transparency studies. Previous transparency research has mainly concentrated on information sharing—that is, the nature and sufficiency of organizational disclosures. According to the above discussion, the process aspect of transparency may be as important as the informational aspect in shaping the effects of interactive media use.

4.3. Integrating signaling theory with public relations scholarship

By applying the costly signaling framework to analyze interactions on social media, this paper links signaling theory to studies in public relations and organizational communication. Signaling theory offers a strong micro-theoretical foundation for explaining how publics come to perceive characteristics such as transparency and credibility in organizations through their interactions.

4.4. Distinguishing legitimacy and trust as distinct pathways

The distinction between legitimacy (a construct related to cognition and norms) and affective trust (a construct based on emotion and a relational perspective) provides a basis for understanding the different ways in which interaction shapes public outcomes. In many cases, past research has either confused these constructs or used them interchangeably.

4.5. Practical implications in theoretical terms

Although this paper does not make any empirical claims, the theoretical findings presented here imply certain conclusions in theoretical-to-practical terms. First, this theoretical framework indicates that companies interested in improving their image must pay attention not only to content development but also to interaction, i.e., the organization's ability to maintain high-quality

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interactions. Signaling logic implies that such efforts must be sincere, because attempts to fake interaction will eventually be uncovered.

5. Conclusion

This essay has created a framework for understanding how public-organizational social media interactions impact public attitudes and behavior. The key theoretical contribution made by this framework is the elaboration of the concept of "interaction-transparency-cognition-behavior", where interaction intensity and quality serve as costly signals that create perceived transparency, leading to legitimacy and affective trust and, thus, resulting in positive word-of-mouth and crisis resistance intentions. By reconceptualizing transparency as a behavioral demonstration rather than a static disclosure, the framework captures the unique dynamics of interactive media environments where organizational responsiveness—not just organizational messaging—becomes the primary basis for public judgment. This demonstration-based transparency is particularly consequential because it is enacted in real time, in full public view, making it both more observable and more credible than traditional forms of information disclosure.

The following research directions arise from this framework. In the first place, the role of time in influencing the relationship between interaction and perception should be theoretically clarified. What is the influence of the number of previous interactions on the perception process? Do they depreciate or accumulate in terms of value?

Furthermore, the convergence of interaction-driven transparency with other forms of organisational communication presents a significant opportunity for theoretical development. It concerns the ways organizations disclose information to the public through media, advertisements, and other tools. Finally, it should be noted that the cultural differences in transparency meanings and values have not yet been considered within organizational studies. The suggested theoretical framework can serve as a starting point for developing more sophisticated theories.

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