

Do Organizational Personification and Personality Matter? The Effect of Interaction and Conversational Tone on Relationship Quality in Social Media

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Abstract

The current study reveals that an organization can increase its personification and personality dimensions on social networking sites by adopting an interpersonal approach of communication (i.e., increased interaction, conversational tone). This personification of the organization led to an increased perceived relationship investment, eventually leading to an increased perceived relationship quality toward the organization. Five personality dimensions were examined, and of these the sincerity dimension mediated the influence of personification on perceived relationship investment. This finding suggests that sincerity might be an important dimension for organization-public relationship building.

Keywords

personification, interaction, conversational tone, relationship quality, personality

Introduction

Past studies in strategic communication have continually emphasized the importance of interpersonal approaches in building relationships between an organization and publics (e.g., Toth, 2000). Interpersonal approaches to communication were traditionally rather

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limited to face-to-face communication and considered to be difficult to carry out in online environments (Yoon, Choi, & Sohn, 2008). However, social networking platforms have partially overcome these limitations by providing users with highly interactive and personalized features (e.g., Berko, Wolvin, & Wolvin, 2007; H. Lee & Park, 2013) and thus have become an “important social milieu that enables interpersonal communication” (Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011, p. 1266).

Organizations are actively adopting those interpersonal features when communicating with publics on social networking sites. Commonly used communication tactics on social networking sites include increasing interaction with publics through responding to customers’ comments and, mimicking interpersonal communication, communicating in a conversational tone (Kelleher, 2009; S. Kim, Kim, & Sung, 2014; Wright, 2001). Studies have indeed shown that such interpersonal communication approaches in online environments lead to positive evaluations of the organization (e.g., Kelleher, 2009; H. Lee & Park, 2013; Yang & Lim, 2009).

The positive effect the interpersonal approaches have on an organization’s evaluations might be due partially to their impact on the personification of the organization (e.g., Men & Tsai, 2015). In other words, by communicating with an interpersonal approach, an organization might enhance its associations with human personalities. Organizations with enhanced human associations tend to induce more positive reactions from publics since people have a natural tendency to react more positively toward an entity that resembles a person (e.g., Delbaere, McQuarrie, & Phillips, 2011).

The purpose of the study is to examine whether communication tactics with an interpersonal approach on a social networking site platform, such as increased interaction and conversational tone, can (a) enhance the organization’s personification and (b) lead to a positive evaluation of the organization.

Literature Review

Interpersonal Communication and Relationship Quality

Scholars in marketing research have discussed personalization and interpersonal communication as important tactics in building relationships with customers (Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Janoff, 2000). De Wulf, Odekerken-Schröder, and Iacobucci (2001) suggested that communicating with consumers using an interpersonal approach is an effective method for improving the perception of a company’s relationship quality. Relationship quality is considered an overall assessment of the strength of a relationship (De Wulf et al., 2001; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999). Despite ongoing debate about the dimensions of relationship quality, the relationship marketing literature shows that researchers have repeatedly validated three dimensions as constituting relationship quality. Those three are relationship satisfaction, trust, and relationship commitment (Crosby et al., 1990; De Wulf et al., 2001). Relationship satisfaction refers to the consumer’s overall affective evaluations of the relationship, trust refers to the consumer’s confidence in the company’s integrity, and relationship commitment refers to the consumer’s desire to continue the relationship (e.g., De Wulf et al., 2001).

De Wulf et al. (2001) suggested that these three dimensions of relationship quality, which comprise an overall assessment of organization-customer relationship strength, are mediated by the customer's perceived relationship investment (PRI) of the organization. PRI is defined as "a consumer's perception of the extent to which a retailer devotes resources, efforts, and attention aimed at maintaining or enhancing relationships with regular customers that do not have outside value and cannot be recovered if these relationships are terminated" (De Wulf et al., p. 35). De Wulf et al. examined the linkage between customers' PRI and perceived relationship quality. The researchers tested the linkage six times in three different countries using two different industries (food and apparel). They successfully showed, through a series of structural equation model tests, that a higher perceived level of relationship investment led to a higher level of relationship quality. Yoon et al. (2008) replicated the results of De Wulf et al. (2001) in a website marketing communication setting and confirmed the influence of PRI on relationship quality.

Scholars have referred to the principle of reciprocity to explain the theoretical framework of PRI in affecting relationship quality (Crosby et al., 1990; De Wulf et al., 2001). The principle of reciprocity refers to people's tendency to return a favor in proportion to the favor they have received (Bagozzi, 1995; De Wulf et al., 2001). If a party invests time, effort, and resources in a relationship, it creates a psychological tie that motivates the other party to establish an expectation of reciprocation and to maintain the relationship (Smith & Barclay, 1997). Considering the linkage between PRI and relationship quality, an important step toward enhancing the relationship between the organization and its publics is the identification of communication strategies and tactics that could increase PRI.

Among four tested relationship marketing tactics (direct mail, preferential treatment, tangible rewards, and interpersonal communication), interpersonal communication, a tactic that focuses on interacting with consumers "in a warm and personal way" (De Wulf et al., 2001, p. 36), was the only dominant determinant of PRI.

In strategic communication, an interpersonal approach to communication has been perceived as a method of symmetrical communication, emphasizing the mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and publics (Grunig, 2002; Toth, 2000). However, the interpersonal approach has often been limited to face-to-face communication and differentiated from mediated communication (Grunig & Grunig, 1992; Rhee, 2007). For example, face-to-face communication has been seen as a general method for public relations practitioners to develop personal relationships or friendships "with key individuals in the media, government, or political and activist groups" (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995, p. 180). If executed symmetrically, face-to-face communication can be a valuable component of excellent public relations (Grunig et al., 1995). From a similar perspective, Yoon et al. (2008) also considered interpersonal communication as face-to-face communication and excluded it as a relationship tactic when, in a website setting, they replicated the study of De Wulf et al. (2001). They argued that face-to-face communication was not possible in an online website setting.

However, seen from a different perspective, interpersonal communication does not necessarily require face-to-face communication. Verderber and Verderber (2004)

defined interpersonal communication as “the process through which people create and manage their relationships, exercising mutual responsibility in creating meaning” (p. 3) and emphasized the process of managing relationships in defining interpersonal communication. Berko et al. (2007) defined interpersonal communication as “communication that is based on communicators’ recognition of each other’s uniqueness and the development of messages that reflect that recognition” (p. 139) and identified it as communication involving a relationship and information. Thus, social networking sites, where users are allowed to create and manage relationships, could be seen as a platform where interpersonal communication can occur.

Interaction on Social Networking Sites

One of the most visible interpersonal communication approaches on social networking platforms is the increased interaction between organization and the publics. Through social networking platforms, organizations can monitor publics’ opinions and complaints in real-time, and respond to those comments if they choose to do so.

Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown (2003) identified interactivity from two perspectives—the functional view and the contingency view. The functional view focuses on the medium itself. The level of interactivity in the functional view is determined by the availability of applications and features from the medium such as e-mail links, feedback forms, and chat rooms (Guillory & Sundar, 2008; Sundar et al., 2003). On the other hand, the contingency view of interactivity focuses on the communication process rather than the medium (Rafaely, 1988; Sundar et al., 2003). The level of interactivity in the contingency approach is determined by how the message sender and recipients react to the medium.

The current study focuses on the perceived contingent interaction reflected in the messages between an organization and its stakeholders. Thus, the concept of interaction has been defined by adopting the contingency view, which perceives interaction as a communication process where both sides send and react to messages interactively.

Contingency interactivity which views interactivity as a communication process between two parties is closely related to the dialogic concept in public relations. Kent and Taylor (1998) argued that “without a dialogic loop in Webbed communication, Internet public relations becomes nothing more than a new monologic communication medium” (p. 325). On social networking sites, the dialogic loop, or feedback mechanism via online comments, is an essential interactive feature of the platform (S. Kim et al., 2014). Organizations’ communication efforts through users’ comments on social networking sites has led to increased engagement of users in conversations with organizations (S. Kim et al., 2014) and increased positive evaluations of the organization (H. Lee & Park, 2013; Sung & Kim, 2014).

Conversational Tone of Communication

In addition to interacting with publics by responding to comments, organizations can communicate with publics in a more personal and intimate way (Kelleher, 2009;

Sweetser, 2010). Social networking platforms have presented organizations with the opportunity to communicate with publics with more of a conversational tone that is personal and intimate, instead of an organizational tone (Sweetser, 2010). Kelleher (2009) referred to this conversational tone as “conversational human voice” and defined it as “an engaging and natural style of organizational communication” (p. 177). Compared with a conversational tone, the traditional organizational tone is more one-sided and profit-driven and less concerned with publics (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Searls & Weinberger, 2001). Kelleher and Miller (2006) pointed out that traditional corporate websites incorporating the traditional organizational tone look more like a “corporate brochure” and do not engage in two-way conversations (Kelleher & Miller, 2006, p. 398).

Several studies have indicated that publics respond positively to the conversational approach in new media platforms (Kelleher, 2009; Yang & Lim, 2009). According to Kelleher and Miller (2006), the conversational human voice includes indicators from public relations concepts such as “being open to dialog, welcoming conversational communication, and providing prompt feedback” (p. 399), as well as characteristics that are not apparent in traditional corporate communication such as “communicating with a sense of humor, admitting mistakes, treating others as human, and providing links to competitors” (p. 399).

In sum, past studies have shown that communication strategies with an interpersonal approach such as increased interaction or a conversational tone of communication are effective at improving organizations’ evaluations on social networking sites (e.g., S. Kim et al., 2014; H. Lee & Park, 2013). In particular, based on the findings of past studies on PRI and relationship quality (e.g., De Wulf et al., 2001; Yoon et al., 2008), the current study assumes that communication strategies with an interpersonal approach will lead to a higher level of PRI that will eventually lead to a higher level of relationship quality.

Hypothesis 1: Perceived level of interaction and relationship quality will have a positive relationship, mediated by PRI.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived level of conversational tone and relationship quality will have a positive relationship, mediated by PRI.

Personification

Whereas several studies have demonstrated the positive effect of interpersonal approaches on company evaluations (e.g., De Wulf et al., 2001; Kelleher, 2009; H. Lee & Park, 2013; Sung & Kim, 2014), few studies have examined factors responsible for the positive effect. The current study posits that this positive effect might be partially attributed to organizations’ interpersonal approach to communication in such a way that enhances their human characteristics. Indeed, the human characteristics of an organization might be made more salient through communication strategies that highlight interpersonal approaches such as increasing interaction and employing a conversational tone. Personification is defined as “a figure of speech in which inanimate

objects are characterized with human associations, thus representing the object as a living and feeling person” (Delbaere et al., 2011, p. 121). Personification occurs due to the natural tendency of people to associate human characteristics with objects (Delbaere et al., 2011). This cognitive bias, called anthropomorphism, is an inherent audience characteristic that allows personification to occur (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007). An inanimate object that is personified and thus perceived as having more human characteristics can elicit more positive evaluations because people have a natural tendency to react positively to objects that resemble human characteristics (e.g., Delbaere et al., 2011, Garretson & Niedrich, 2004).

The effect of personification has been studied in terms of “spokescharacters” (Holzwarth, Janiszewski, & Neumann, 2006), robots (Kiesler, Powers, Fussell, & Torrey, 2008), and avatars (Nan, Anghelcev, Myers, Sar, & Faber, 2006). These seem natural since the appearance of these objects resembles an actual human being. However, for personification to occur, the object does not necessarily have to resemble the appearance of a human being. Corporate communication messages and media can also imitate human relationships by simulating real-life human thoughts, feelings, and actions (Stern, 1997). K. M. Lee and Nass (2003) found that people felt a computer to possess a stronger social presence when the computer’s voice had a personality matching their own (K. M. Lee & Nass, 2003). Through an experiment, Delbaere et al. (2011) also found that when inanimate products in a print advertisement were manipulated so as to appear to be engaging in a human behavior (e.g., a moisturizer bottle drinking water from a straw, a fruit and nut each wearing a wedding ring), they elicited human associations and led to a higher perceived degree of personality scores for the products.

In sum, studies have shown that communication conveyed via tools that resemble human appearance (e.g., Bartneck, Bleeker, Bun, Fens, & Riet, 2010; Holzwarth et al., 2006) or communication that resembles a human relationship (e.g., Delbaere et al., 2011; K. M. Lee & Nass, 2003) leads to greater social presence. Such social presence—a feeling that a behavior or sensory experience indicates another intelligence’s presence—eventually leads to a favorable attitude toward the communicator and enhanced personality attributions (Choi, Miracle, & Biocca, 2001). Thus, the current study posits that organizations’ communication strategies that employ interpersonal communication approaches, such as increased interaction and conversational tone, will enhance the personification of the organization, and, in turn, lead to increased PRI. In addition, since PRI will positively affect relationship quality, this study also proposes that (a) the organization’s personification and (b) PRI serially mediate the relationship between the interpersonal approaches (interaction and conversational tone) and relationship quality.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived level of interaction and PRI will have a positive relationship, mediated by the perceived level of personification of the organization.

Hypothesis 4: Perceived level of conversational tone and PRI will have a positive relationship, mediated by the perceived level of personification of the organization.

Hypothesis 5: Perceived level of interaction and relationship quality will have a positive relationship, serially mediated by (a) the organization's personification level and (b) PRI.

Hypothesis 6: Perceived level of conversational tone and relationship quality will have a positive relationship, serially mediated by (a) the organization's personification level and (b) PRI.

Organizations' Personality

The perception of organizations' personality has been conceptualized as "the set of human personality characteristics perceived to be associated with an organization" (Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004, p. 86). The concept of organization personality suggests that organizations possess different personalities just as people do. For example, whereas Disney is perceived as friendly and pleasant, Nike is perceived as stylish and trendy, and McDonalds as low-class and simple (Slaughter et al., 2004).

The perception of an organization's personality can be formed through various factors that are associated with the organization, such as "the type and quality of their products and services, the psychological aspects of their places of business, their employees, clientele that use their products and services, and social information" (Slaughter et al., 2004, p. 85). The organization's personality can also be actively formed by its communication strategies, including marketing and advertising strategies (Delbaere et al., 2011; Slaughter et al., 2004).

Research on the personality of organizations is mostly based on brand personality. Based on the Big Five human personality dimensions (extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness), Aaker (1997) developed a personality scale applicable to brands. The personality scale consists of five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. Consumers perceive sincere brands as down-to-earth, honest, and wholesome. Similarly, exciting brands are perceived as daring and spirited, competent brands as reliable and intelligent, sophisticated brands as upper class and charming, and finally, rugged brands as outdoorsy and tough. Aaker (1997) argued that human and brand personality traits differ in terms of how they are formed and thus need separate measures. While human personality traits are "inferred on the basis of the individual's behavior, physical characteristics, attitudes and beliefs, and demographic characteristics" (Aaker, 1997, p. 348), brand personality can be formed in "any direct or indirect way by people associated with the brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 348).

Since interpersonal approaches of communication will increase the perceived level of an organization's personification, it is reasonable to assume that perceived personality traits of the organization will also be enhanced. Of Aaker's brand personality dimensions—sincerity, competence, excitement, sophistication, and ruggedness—which one will have the most positive influence on the relationship between organization and publics? If personality dimension can mediate the relationship between personification and PRI, do (a) personification, (b) personality dimensions, and

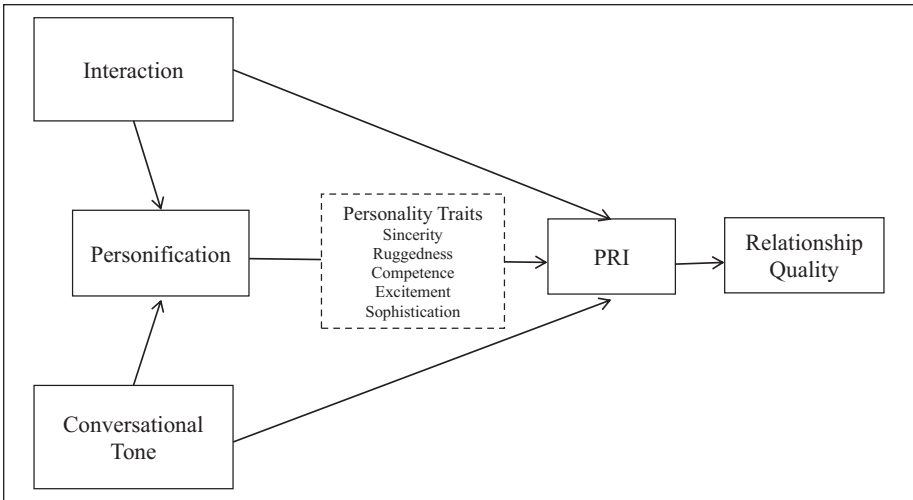


Figure 1. The conceptual influence model of interpersonal approaches on relationship quality. Note. PRI = perceived relationship investment.

(c) PRI function as serial mediators between interpersonal approaches of communication (i.e., interaction and conversational tone) and relationship quality? Based on these assumptions and questions, the following hypothesis and research questions have been formulated:

Hypothesis 7: The perceived level of organizations' personification and PRI will have a positive relationship, mediated by personality dimensions.

Research Question 1: If personality dimensions mediate the impact of personification on PRI, which dimensions of personality will be most affected by personification?

Research Question 2: Do (a) personification, (b) personality dimensions, and (c) PRI function as serial mediators between interpersonal approaches (i.e., interaction and conversational tone) and relationship quality?

Presented in Figure 1 is the conceptual model in this study that illustrates the relationships between interpersonal approaches and relationship quality. Personification, personality dimensions, and PRI are proposed as serial mediators in the model. Since we are not sure which dimensions of personality traits would mediate the relationship between personification and PRI, personality dimensions are presented in a dotted box.

Method

An online experiment was conducted to examine the impact of an organization's interpersonal communication strategies on different company evaluations (i.e., personification, personality dimensions, PRI, and relationship quality). Regarding interpersonal

communication strategies, this study looked at two types: Interaction (high vs. low) and tone of the company's communication (conversational tone: high vs. low). Thus, the study was conducted as a 2 (interaction: high vs. low) \times 2 (conversational tone: high vs. low) between-subjects factorial design experiment.

To avoid a familiarity effect and other confounding effects due to prior judgments toward the company, a fictitious company was created for the experiment. The fictitious company was named "Boles" and was described as a U.S.-based supermarket chain. The online survey was distributed via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Amazon Mechanical Turk has become a popular vehicle for online experimental research in social science (Mason & Suri, 2012; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Compared with subjects from other traditional data collection methods such as a lab subject pool and an Internet discussion board, participants of Amazon Mechanical Turk have shown no difference in exhibiting classic heuristics and biases, and paying attention to survey directions (Paolacci et al., 2010). A total of 156 participated in the study, and after excluding invalid (incomplete) questionnaires ($n = 10$), 146 participants were included in the final analyses (average cell size: 36.5, maximum: 37, and minimum: 35). Participants who successfully completed the survey were given 25 cents. Of the 146 participants, 71 were female (48.63%) and 75 were male (51.37%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 67 years. The mean of the participants' age was 35.32 years and the standard deviation was 11.56.

Stimuli and Procedure

All participants were exposed to the Facebook page of the fictitious company Boles. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: High interaction/High Conversational tone, High interaction/Low Conversational tone, Low interaction/High Conversational tone, and Low interaction/Low Conversational tone. All participants were exposed to four corporate posts that Boles has putatively posted. On the first page of the online survey, participants were exposed to a snapshot of Boles's corporate Facebook page. The fictitious corporate Facebook page was created using Photoshop and it resembled an actual Facebook corporate page. The generated Facebook corporate page included a corporate message from Boles. Below the post was added a fictitious customer response commenting on the company's post. After reading the page, the participants were asked to click the "next" button, which doing so brought them to the next page that showed another corporate Facebook post by Boles and another customer comment posted below. This process was done a total of four times, exposing every participant to four corporate posts and four customer comments (see stimuli examples in the appendix). After being exposed to these stimuli, participants were asked to fill out survey questions measuring the following variables. To ensure consistency across different conditions, the descriptiveness and realisticness of the stimuli, as well as familiarity and involvement toward grocery stores were collected and checked.

High Versus Low Interaction. As noted above, a customer comment was added to each company post. In the high-interaction condition, the company responded again to that

customer comment. Participants in the high-interaction condition were exposed to four company posts, each one accompanied with one customer comment and one company reply. In the low-interaction condition, on the other hand, the company did not respond to the customer comment.

High Versus Low Conversational tone. Conversational tone was varied by manipulating the tone of the corporate messages, which included both corporate Facebook messages and corporate responses to customers' comments. Based on the conceptualizations of Kelleher and Miller (2006), the messages in the conversational tone condition were developed using a more conversational style of communication. In the low conversational tone condition, on the other hand, the company responded to consumers in a more professional and organizational manner (see the appendix).

Measures

Measures of the interpersonal approaches were adopted from previous studies—perceived interaction (four items, McMillan & Hwang, 2002) and perceived conversational tone (three items, Kelleher & Miller, 2006, see Table 1). Descriptiveness and realisticness of the messages were checked to ensure consistency across conditions through the following two questions: “The corporate Facebook messages I just read were descriptive” and “The corporate Facebook messages I just read were realistic.” Personification of the company was measured by three 7-point semantic differential scale items suggested by Kim and Sundar (2012); the three were humanlike/machinelike, natural/unnatural, and lifelike/artificial. The company's personality traits were measured following Aaker's (1997) personality measures, consisting of 42 personality traits representing the five major dimensions of brand personality (see Table 1). In addition to assessing each personality dimension, the average of all 42 personality traits was calculated to see the overall personality trait attribution. The PRI was measured by three 7-point Likert-type scale items, as suggested by De Wulf et al. (2001). Relationship quality was measured with three constructs (Crosby et al., 1990; De Wulf et al., 2001; Posdakoff & Mackenzie, 1994): (a) relationship satisfaction, (b) trust, and (c) relationship commitment. The reliabilities of all these variables were acceptable, ranging from .782 to .959. Table 1 presents all the measure items, reliabilities, means, and standard deviations of all variables.

Results

Manipulation Check

Perceived interaction, $F(1, 142) = 135.04, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .49$, and conversation tone were successfully manipulated, $F(1, 142) = 55.11, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .28$. In addition, participants showed no significant differences in perceiving the descriptiveness and realisticness of the messages across four conditions ($p > 0.5$).

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliability of Measurement Items.

Variable	M	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Perceived interactivity: Overall	4.62	1.78	.957
INT1 Enables two-way communication	4.72	1.98	
INT2 Enables concurrent communication	4.50	1.90	
INT3 Enables interpersonal interaction	4.50	1.87	
INT4 Enables conversation	4.77	1.83	
Perceived conversational tone: Overall	3.83	1.29	.782
COV1 Uses an organizational voice of communication (reverse)	2.95	1.42	
COV2 Uses an informational voice of communication	3.95	1.62	
COV3 Uses conversation-style communication	4.60	1.60	
Personification: Overall	4.98	1.50	.957
PER1 Humanlike/machinelike	4.93	1.58	
PER2 Natural/unnatural	5.07	1.49	
PER3 Lifelike/artificial	4.95	1.61	
Personality: Overall	4.02	0.89	
Sincerity: Overall	4.70	1.10	.925
SIN1 Down-to-earth	4.92	1.49	
SIN2 Honest	5.18	1.21	
SIN3 Wholesome	5.02	1.32	
SIN4 Cheerful	4.85	1.62	
SIN5 Family-oriented	4.95	1.37	
SIN6 Small town	3.96	1.55	
SIN7 Sincere	5.03	1.44	
SIN8 Real	4.99	1.41	
SIN9 Original	4.21	1.61	
SIN10 Sentimental	3.37	1.50	
SIN11 Friendly	5.18	1.43	
Ruggedness: Overall	2.20	1.07	.883
RUG1 Outdoorsy	2.19	1.27	
RUG2 Tough	2.01	1.10	
RUG3 Masculine	2.54	1.45	
RUG4 Western	2.26	1.40	
RUG5 Rugged	1.98	1.23	
Excitement: Overall	4.05	1.31	.947
EXC1 Daring	3.20	1.57	
EXC2 Spirited	4.01	1.76	
EXC3 Imaginative	3.86	1.67	
EXC4 Up-to-date	4.95	1.48	
EXC5 Trendy	4.08	1.72	
EXC6 Exciting	3.86	1.62	
EXC7 Cool	3.89	1.62	
EXC8 Young	3.92	1.64	
EXC9 Unique	3.84	1.73	
EXC10 Independent	4.31	1.54	
EXC11 Contemporary	4.60	1.43	

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Variable	M	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Competence: Overall	4.79	0.90	.845
COM1 Reliable	5.26	1.20	
COM2 Intelligent	4.92	1.26	
COM3 Successful	5.01	1.24	
COM4 Hard working	5.08	1.38	
COM5 Secure	4.82	1.35	
COM6 Technical	3.74	1.60	
COM7 Corporate	4.49	1.59	
COM8 Leader	4.40	1.37	
COM9 Confident	5.35	1.11	
Sophistication: Overall	3.13	1.10	.851
SOP1 Upper class	3.05	1.33	
SOP2 Charming	3.56	1.56	
SOP3 Glamorous	2.47	1.30	
SOP4 Good looking	3.09	1.41	
SOP5 Feminine	2.99	1.49	
SOP6 Smooth	3.62	1.61	
Perceived relationship investment	5.41	1.15	.915
PR11 This company makes efforts to increase customer's loyalty	5.37	1.24	
PR12 This company makes various efforts to improve its tie with regular customers	5.43	1.25	
PR13 This company really cares about keeping regular customers	5.44	1.25	
Relationship quality: Overall (Trust, Commitment, Satisfaction)	4.99	1.14	.958
Trust: Overall	5.13	1.26	.959
TRU1 This company gives me a feeling of trust	5.10	1.28	
TRU2 I have trust in this company	5.03	1.32	
TRU3 This company gives me a trustworthy impression	5.26	1.32	
Commitment: Overall	4.63	1.32	.912
COT1 I might be willing "to go the extra mile" to remain a customer of this company	4.55	1.45	
COT2 I feel loyal toward the company	4.92	1.43	
COT3 Even if this company would be more difficult to reach, I would still keep buying there	4.44	1.40	
Satisfaction: Overall	5.19	1.12	.905
SAT1 I might have a high-quality relationship with this company	4.97	1.16	
SAT2 I am happy with the efforts this company is making toward customers	5.29	1.37	
SAT3 I might be satisfied with the relationship I have with this company	5.32	1.14	

Note. All items were measured by a 7-point Likert-type scale except personality items. The personality items were measured by a 7-point semantic differential scale.

Mediating Role of Perceived Relationship Investment: Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2

In testing mediation effects, researchers (Hayes, 2013; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) often recommend the use of the bootstrapping procedure method (e.g., PROCESS), due its higher power. The bootstrapping procedure is a nonparametric resampling procedure that “generates an approximation of the sampling distribution of a statistic from the available data” (Stange et al., 2012, p. 144). To test all the hypotheses proposed here, this study employed Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS. To control potential confounding effects, demographic variables (gender, age, and ethnicity) were added as covariates to all tested PROCESS models.

Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 assumed that PRI would positively mediate the effect of interaction (Hypothesis 1) and conversational tone (Hypothesis 2) on relationship quality. When running PROCESS for each independent variable (e.g., interaction, conversational tone), we put the other independent variables as covariate. One of the constraints of PROCESS is that only one independent variable can be listed (Hayes, 2013). By putting the other independent variable as a covariate, PROCESS can estimate a model with multiple independent variables (Hayes, 2013). All resulting paths and effects (direct and indirect) will be mathematically the same as if they had been estimated simultaneously (as in a SEM program; Hayes, 2013). But the difference that PROCESS can provide, is the output for the total, direct, and indirect effects for each specific independent variable on dependent variable through mediators. Thus, to estimate direct and indirect effects of all independent variables, the model should be run for each independent variable (Hayes, 2013). Therefore, the PROCESS results reported in this study are attained after possible relationships have been considered between the two independent variables (e.g., interaction, conversational tone). When interaction was put as an independent variable, we put conversational tone as a covariate, and vice versa.

The analysis identified significant mediation effects of PRI for both interaction and conversational tone. In specific, the results for Hypothesis 1 showed that the 95% confidence intervals (CIs) for PRI did not include zero, 95% CIs [0.523, 1.078], indicating a significant mediating effect of interaction on relationship quality through PRI. Similarly, the results for Hypothesis 2 showed that the 95% CIs for PRI did not include zero, 95% CIs [0.147, 0.625], indicating a significant mediating effect of conversational tone on relationship quality through PRI (see Table 2). Thus, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were both supported. Direct effects of interaction and conversational tone on relationship quality were not statistically significant. This suggested that the positive impacts of interaction and conversational tone on relationship quality existed when mediated by PRI, indicating the full mediations of PRI between interaction/conversational tone and relationship quality. Thus, when publics perceived an increased interaction or enhanced conversational tone, their assessment of the organizations’ PRI increased, which, in turn, improved their perceived relationship quality with the organization.

Table 2. Simple and Serial Mediation Tests of PRI and Personification (Hypothesis 1-Hypothesis 6).

Antecedents	Mediators	Outcomes	Coefficient (SE)	95% Bias-corrected bootstrap CI	
				Lower	Upper
Interactivity	PRI	Relationship quality	.774 (.144)	0.5080	1.0700
ConvTone	PRI	Relationship quality	.359 (.132)	0.1381	0.6248
Interactivity	PER	PRI	.147 (.076)	0.0326	0.3387
ConvTone	PER	PRI	.216 (.113)	0.0357	0.4744
Interactivity	PER → PRI	Relationship quality	.089 (.051)	0.0216	0.2324
ConvTone	PER → PRI	Relationship quality	.131 (.078)	0.0232	0.3316

Note. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; ConvTone = conversational tone; PRI = perceived relationship investment; PER = personification. Five thousand bootstrap samples.

Mediating Role of Personification: Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4

Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 posited that personification would positively mediate the effect of interaction (Hypothesis 3) and conversational tone (Hypothesis 4) on PRI. For both mediation analyses, all CIs were above zero, Hypothesis 3: 95% CIs [0.032, 0.361]; Hypothesis 4: 95% CIs [0.038, 0.480], and the coefficients were positive (see Table 2), supporting Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4. For Hypothesis 3, the direct effect of interaction on PRI was also significant, 95% CIs [0.036, 0.474], indicating a partial mediation effect of personification. For conversational tone (Hypothesis 4), its direct effect on PRI was not significant, indicating the full mediation of personification between conversational tone and PRI. The results suggested that when publics perceived an increased interaction or enhanced conversational tone, they perceived the organization as more humanlike (higher levels of personification), which, in turn, improved their perception of the organization's relationship investment intentions (see Table 2).

Serial Mediations of Personification and PRI: Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6

Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6 proposed that in the process of interaction (Hypothesis 5) and conversational tone (Hypothesis 6) positively affecting relationship quality, personification and PRI will serially mediate the relationship. Serial mediation tests using PROCESS were performed. The results suggested that personification and PRI serially mediated the positive impact of interaction on relationship quality, as 95% CIs for the indirect effects were above zero: CIs [0.0200, 0.2306], indirect effect = .089, standard error (SE) = .050 (see Table 2). In this serial mediation test, the simple mediations of Interaction → Personification → Relationship Quality and Interaction → PRI

Table 3. Mediating Role of Personality Dimensions (5,000 bootstrap samples).

Personality dimensions	Outcome (Y)	Coefficient (SE)	95% Bias corrected bootstrap CI	
			Lower	Upper
<i>Personification</i>				
Ruggedness	PRI	.0019 (.006)	-0.0039	0.0247
Sincerity		.3301 (.082)	0.1919	0.5197
Competence		.0275 (.023)	-0.0065	0.0856
Excitement		-.0470 (.043)	-0.1353	0.0377
Sophistication		-.0279 (.017)	-0.0713	0.0002

Note. SE = standard error; CI = confidence interval; PRI = perceived relationship investment.

→ Relationship Quality were also significant (CIs were all above zero). The serial mediations of Conversational Tone → Personification → PRI → Relationship Quality were also significant as the CIs did not include zero (see Table 2 for CIs). The indirect effect estimate was .131, indicating the positive serial mediations. The simple mediations of Conversational Tone → Personification → Relationship Quality and Conversational tone → PRI → Relationship quality were also significant (all CIs were above zero). Thus, serial mediations of personification and PRI for both interaction and conversational tone (Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6) were supported.

Mediating Role of Organization's Personality Dimensions (Hypothesis 7 and Research Questions 1 and 2)

Hypothesis 7 posited simple mediations of personality dimensions between personification and PRI, and RQ1 asked which dimensions of personality would be most affected by personification. A parallel simple mediation analysis using PROCESS was performed with all five personality dimensions being input as parallel mediators. The indirect effect test results showed that the 95% CIs for only the sincerity dimension did not include zero, 95% CIs = [.192, .520], effect = .33, SE = .08, indicating a significant indirect effect of personification on PRI through the sincerity personality dimension. In contrast, the 95% CIs for the other four personality dimensions included zero: ruggedness [-0.004, 0.025], competence [-0.007, .086], excitement [-0.135, 0.038], sophistication [-0.071, 0.000], indicating that the other four dimensions did not mediate the effect of personification on PRI (see Table 3). To answer Research Question 1, we also looked at the direct effects of personification on each of the personality dimensions. Personification positively affected all four personality dimensions (sincerity: $b = .465$, $t = 9.82$, $p < .00001$; competence: $b = .139$, $t = 2.84$, $p < .006$; excitement: $b = .435$, $t = 6.86$, $p < .00001$; and sophistication: $b = .187$, $t = 3.15$, $p < .003$), except ruggedness ($p > .05$). Based on the coefficient scores, the dimension most positively affected by personification was sincerity.

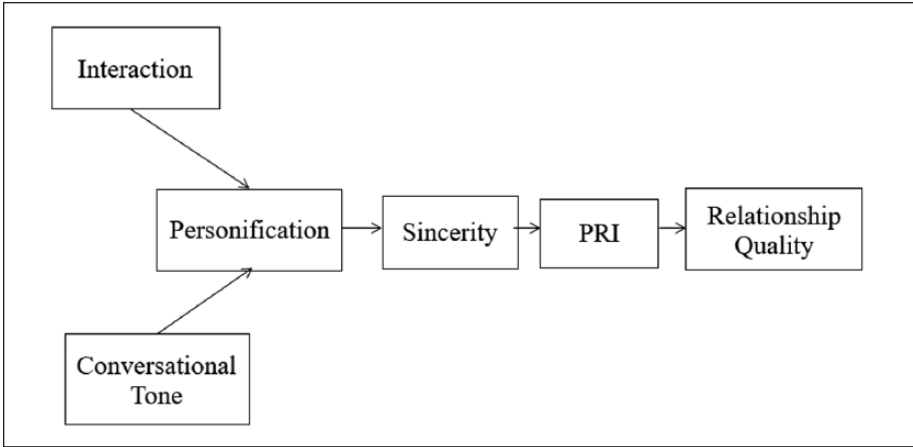


Figure 2. The refined influence model of interpersonal approaches on relationship quality.

Finally, Research Question 2 asked if (a) personification, (b) personality dimensions, and (c) PRI all serially mediate the impacts of interpersonal approaches (interaction and conversational tone) on relationship quality. Since only sincerity was identified as a mediator between personification and PRI, we tested the serial mediation model with (a) personification, (b) sincerity, and (c) PRI as serial mediators between interpersonal approaches and relationship quality. The analysis results for interaction using PROCESS suggested that the serial mediations of Interaction → Personification → Sincerity → PRI → Relationship Quality were statistically significant: CIs [0.0314, 0.1657], effect = .076, $SE = .032$. The serial mediations of Conversational tone → Personification → Sincerity → PRI → Relationship Quality were also statistically significant: CIs [0.046, 0.242], effect = .111, $SE = .048$. Thus, the result indicated that publics who experienced an increased interaction or enhanced conversational tone from the organization perceived the organization to be more humanlike, and the increased personification perception led them to attribute more sincere personality traits toward the organization, and, in turn, this made them feel that the organization had more intentions to invest in consumer relationship building, and finally made them perceive that the relationship quality that they had with the organization was stronger. Based on all the analyses, the refined conceptual model is presented in Figure 2.

Discussion

Perceived Relationship Investment and Relationship Quality

Consistent with past studies, increasing the interaction with publics by responding to their comments had a significant positive effect on organization evaluation

(e.g., H. Lee & Park, 2013; Sung & Kim, 2014; Yoon et al., 2008). Increased perceived interaction had a significant positive effect on relationship quality. This is in line with the concept of the dialogic loop in dialogic communication theory, which views the constant two-way communication between an organization and its publics as an important principle upon which to build organization-public relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). The organization's effort to communicate with its publics by sharing opinions and responding to its publics' comments is rewarded by an enhanced perception of the organization's willingness to invest in relationship building with its publics.

Conversational tone of communication also showed positive effects on organization-publics relationship. Several real-life cases in the past have shown that automated and repetitive responses from organization on social networking sites could lead to severely negative evaluations of the organization (e.g., Eha, 2012). The findings of this study support that personalized and human responses from the organization are important and help the organization build positive relationships with publics.

Furthermore, in line with previous studies (De Wulf et al., 2001; Yoon et al., 2008), an important role in determining relationship quality was played by the perceived relationship quality. PRI mediated the effects of interaction and conversational tone on relationship quality. The positive path from PRI to relationship quality supports past studies (e.g., Bagozzi, 1995; De Wulf et al., 2001) that have argued that consumers feel obligated to reciprocate organizations' investment in the relationship between them, leading to higher perceived relationship quality (e.g., trust, commitment, satisfaction) with the organization.

Personification and Personality Dimensions

The findings were in line with past studies that have found that interaction (e.g., Sung & Kim, 2014) and conversational tone (e.g., Kelleher & Miller, 2006) lead to positive evaluations of an organization. The current study found that personification might be an important mediating factor that leads to this outcome. Increasing interaction and adopting a conversational tone of communication significantly enhanced personification of the organization. And the increased personification led to increased PRI, eventually leading to an enhanced relationship quality. In other words, people felt that the organization was more life-like and humanlike when it responded to its publics' comments or communicated in a more conversational voice, which led to a more positive evaluation toward the organization.

Personification can occur even through a platform that does not physically resemble a human being. In the current study, the communication was not conveyed through a robot or human-resembling platform, but through a platform designed as a social networking site. In line with past studies (Delbaere et al., 2011; K. M. Lee & Nass, 2003), the current study provides evidence that communication tactics that adopt

human relationships, such as responding to people in a relevant manner or communicating in a human tone, could lead to increased organization personification.

The fact that an organization's personality can be enhanced through communication tactics is important at a time when the personality of an organization is becoming a growing focus of relationship management, especially in the online environment. Even with the recent United Airline PR disaster case, several media regarded the company's dehumanized perceptions as one of the reasons for the crisis (e.g., Podsada & Jordon, 2017). Tony Keller, Senior Vice President of the PR company SSPR, blamed the "narcissistic and passive-aggressive apology" of United's CEO and emphasized that the company "needs to humanize and contemporize itself" (Bradley, 2017).

In this study, enhanced personification resulted in increased personality traits being associated with the organization in this study. The study revealed that the sincerity dimension, which is associated with traits such as warm and considerate, is an influential mediating factor in affecting PRI. In other words, not all personality dimensions led to increased PRI. Out of the five brand personality dimensions, only sincerity mediated the effect of personification on PRI, indicating that sincerity is the most influential personality dimension for relationship building. This is in line with past studies. Brands have continually pursued the sincerity dimension to project a personality that is warm, caring, considerate, and down-to-earth (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Ragas & Roberts, 2009). The sincerity dimension was perceived as the most salient dimension linked to an organization's communication program that attempted to develop the organization's relationships with its publics (Ragas & Roberts, 2009).

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By explicating the process of an organization's adoption of interaction and conversational tone in social media communication, this study contributes to our understanding of how computer-mediated communication by an organization can affect people's psychological associations of the organization (e.g., De Wulf et al., 2001; Sung & Kim, 2014). The findings of this study provide an integrated theoretical framework of the organization's interpersonal approaches on social media. The serial mediations of personification, sincerity dimension, and PRI delineate the psychological mechanism of publics responding to an organization's efforts to communicate with enhanced interaction and adopting a conversational tone. This offers an important insight into how people's mind-sets work in response to organizational communication. This framework could also facilitate further theory testing regarding the process of interpersonal approaches on social media by industry type and media channel. For practitioners, it is recommended that the organization should actively communicate with its publics on its social media with higher interaction levels and using a conversational tone instead

of a stall-wall or mechanical approach to public comments. This extra effort will be rewarded by people perceiving the organization to possess enhanced personification, a sincere personality, and greater relationship investment, which all translates into overall better relationship quality.

This study also provides an important insight into the possibility of both conscious and unconscious anthropomorphism (i.e., personification of and personality attributions to the organization), that might be nurtured by the organization's interpersonal approaches on social media. When people directly and indirectly associate the organization with humanlike or a sincere/caring personality, they tend to make sense of the organization's active communication efforts with its consumers and, in turn, reward the organization with better perceived relationship quality.

Conclusion

Although the current research provides meaningful implications, it also has its limitations. The online experiment conducted in the study was based on a fictitious organization in a very specific industry (supermarket chain). It is possible that unique circumstances existing in different industries will influence people's perceptions of an organization's communication efforts on social networking sites. The relationship between the perceived organizations' personality dimensions and organization evaluation could be different depending on the type of the organizations' industry or its characteristics. For example, for an organization in the banking industry or security business, the most important factor for the publics' evaluation might be efficiency, and the "competence" personality dimension could have a stronger impact on the organization's positive evaluation. Similarly, for an organization that sells luxurious goods, sophistication could have more influence on a positive evaluation toward the organization. Thus, we recommend future research to replicate our study using other industries with varying characteristics in terms of perceived personalities, the level of social media usage, and expected consumer interaction levels. In addition, given that more scholars recently pointed out the need for large enough sample size in experimental research to increase the power of a test and to avoid Type II error (Bakker, van Dijk, & Wicherts, 2012), we also recommend future research consider increasing the sample size. Moreover, future studies could consider a longitudinal study using a real organization to explore the long-term effect of organizations' communication strategies on social networking sites.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important insights for online strategic communication in terms of the underlying psychological mechanism of publics. Most importantly, the findings suggest that personifying an organization on social networking sites through interpersonal approaches of communication could be an important matter in affecting the organization's perceived personality traits, and eventually the relationship quality between the organization and its publics.

Appendix

Stimuli Examples

High Interaction: High Conversational Tone



BOLES

Wanting to stay in tonight to watch a flick or two? Grab some of the newest movies, invite over friends and order up the new \$10 Movie Dinner Box at www.boles.com. Let the show begin!



Andy Holler Sounds nice! Wonder if the ones in Florida will have them?



BOLES Hi Andy, glad that you are interested! The Movie Dinner Box will be available in every Boles store starting next week! Try it our and let us know what you think!



BOLES

Boiled or grilled, there's no wrong way to eat sweet corn. But why settle for just any kind of sweet corn when you can bite into our new Florida Sweet Corn! It's the sweetest corn you'll ever taste, but we are only offering this yummy treat for a limited time. Visit [www.boles.com/FloridaSweetCorn!](http://www.boles.com/FloridaSweetCorn)



Pamela Adams Is the corn safe? Does it have GMO's?



BOLES Hi Pamela! No, it doesn't have GMO. We never purchase GMO produce of any kind and we consistently communicate this message to our suppliers. Thanks for your question!



BOLES

Don't want to wait in line for your favorite sub? Try our new Deli Online Ordering system to order your Boles custom subs, wraps and deli products! Starting today the service is available in 70 of our stores! Click www.boles.com/delionline to see if your store is one of them!




Barb Amato Wow, so I can order subs from Boles online? Cool, how does that work?




BOLES I'm happy to help explain that to you, Barb! On your computer, visit www.boles.com/order. The system will give you an email confirmation (along with an order pickup number) after you are done. Your order will be waiting for you at your local store!


High Interaction: Low Conversational Tone


High Interaction – Low Conversational Tone




BOLES Boles launched today the new Movie Dinner Box for a special price of \$10. The Boles Movie Dinner Box is the ideal box to share with friends over movies. For more information, please visit www.boles.com.


 **Andy Holler** Sounds nice! Wonder if the ones in Florida will have them?


 **BOLES** Thank you for your interest in our new Movie Dinner Box. The Movie Dinner Box will be available in every Boles store starting next week.




BOLES Boles introduces Florida Sweet Corn starting this week. This new variety of sweet corn is known for its significantly sweet taste. Florida Sweet Corn is only available for a limited time during the crop's peak season. For more information, visit www.boles.com/FloridaSweetCorn.


 **Pamela Adams** Is the corn safe? Does it have GMO's?

 **BOLES** Thank you for your interest. Suppliers of Boles Florida Sweet Corn do not use GMO seeds. Boles does not purchase GMO produce of any kind and continuously communicates this message to suppliers.



BOLES Boles Deli Online Ordering, the online order placement of Boles Deli custom subs, wraps and deli products, has expanded today to 70 stores across the country. For more information on Boles Deli Online Ordering, please visit www.boles.com/delionline.

 **Barb Amato** Wow, so I can order subs from Boles online? Cool, how does that work?

 **BOLES** Customers may place their orders online by visiting www.boles.com/order. An order pickup number will be provided on the customer's final order summary and emailed to them as well. Customers may then pick up their order at their designated store.

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