

What's Trending? Social Media and its Effects on Organizational Communication

Emily Langer

Faculty Sponsor: Ronda Leahy, Communication Studies

ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown how social media has become increasingly incorporated as a means of organizational communication with employees and the public within the last decade. Leonardi, Huysman, and Steinfield (2013) examined how the use of social media among employees affected the communicative activities through which work is accomplished. Much of the research surrounding social media has marginalized the effect that the use of social media has had on organizational communication. The purpose of this study is to interpret how social media has affected organizational communication within an organization, and with consumers and the public. Eleven semi-structured interviews with executives from organizations that have implemented social media as a process of organizational communication were conducted. Results indicated that social media has affected both internal organizational communication through the extension that it has added to relationships outside of work. Additionally, it has affected the external organizational communication through the increased amount of interaction that occurs between an organization and its consumers.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, social media use has developed and grown into one of the most common forms of computer-mediated communication in today's society due to the vast increase of technologies that are on the market. Not only has this phenomenon impacted everyday communication, but it has also become pervasive in organizations, providing a platform through which organizational communication occurs (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013).

As discussion of social media continues to highlight the effects it has had on organizational communication both internally and externally, the amount of research has steadily increased as well. Previous research has shown how social media has become increasingly incorporated as a means of organizational communication with employees and the public within the last decade. For example, Leonardi, et al. (2013) examined how the use of social media among employees affected the communicative activities through which work is accomplished. Much of the research surrounding social media has marginalized the effect that the use of social media has had on organizations that have implemented it as part of their organizational communication.

The purpose of this study is to interpret how social media has increased, decreased, or maintained the success of a company through the effect it has had on organizational communication within an organization and with the public. An extension of research on social media use from an executive's perspective will provide information and interpretations that can be utilized to better adapt to the use of social media as a new method of communication that continues to grow within the corporate world.

The remainder of the paper will include a review of literature that will identify the gaps in previous research surrounding the use of social media as a form of organizational communication. Two research questions will be posed to guide the research through the method described. Finally, the results that were collected will be discussed in relation to previous literature so as to facilitate a better understanding of how the use of social media has affected how organizational communication occurs both internally and externally.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As social media becomes increasingly prominent in organizations, it is important to develop an understanding of how it has affected the way that organizational communication occurs both internally and externally. This begins by defining organizational communication and providing a review of research that has highlighted its effects on an organization. An application of Systems Theory will then provide a framework for the

current study. Finally, this review of literature will also define social media and review areas of research that have covered the use of social media within an organization.

Organizational Communication

Organizational communication has laid the framework for scholars to determine how communication affects all aspects of functioning within an organization. Communication will always be an essential part of an organization because it connects each individual function and group as a whole, and is also the means by which an organization is both created and sustained (Santra & Giri, 2009). Communication is a critical component of an organization because it allows members to shape the culture through their individual perceptions, which strengthens organizational identification, and also enables an organization to reach its potential goals (Modaff, DeWine, & Butler, 2007 & Santra & Giri, 2009). According to Modaff, et al. (2007), "Organizational communication is considered the process of creating, exchanging, interpreting (correctly or incorrectly), and storing messages within a system of human interrelationships" (p. 3). Santra and Giri (2009) also note that this dynamic process goes beyond the simple transference of information, but rather seeks to influence a specific behavior.

Researchers have long been aware of the importance of organizational communication, which is apparent in the ever growing body of work that has studied organizational communication in a variety of contexts. In the past, organizational communication research focused on interpreting how communication varied across different types of organizations. However, recently the focus has shifted to how new technologies affect the organizational communication process. For instance, Santra and Giri (2009) studied the profound impact that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has had on organizations. Their research focused on how this new method has not only made communication more effective, but more convenient and affordable as well. Not only is it important to look at organizational communication itself, but also necessary to review areas of research that consider the impact it has had on organization effectiveness.

Organizational effectiveness. According to Kreps (1985), organizational effectiveness is "dependent on how well organization members are able to communicate and use relevant information" (p. 109). Recently, organizational effectiveness has been largely impacted by the use of CMC, by improving both the internal and external communication capabilities of an organization. CMC has increased the participation of organizational members because it has created more equality and less social pressure (Santra & Giri, 2009). According to Santra and Giri (2009), through computer-mediated communication, organizational members are able to "slowly establish shared meanings and develop a sense of organizational identity" (p. 106). While face-to-face communication is still the best form of communication within an organization, doing so on a regular basis is no longer feasible in most organizations, making organizational effectiveness dependant on CMC to fulfill most organizational processes (Santra & Giri, 2009). The advancements in technology have continued to improve the quality of work by enabling organizational members to communicate more effectively on a regular basis, thus improving the overall effectiveness of the organization. Research that examines the effectiveness of organizational communication is understood through Systems Theory, gaining a better perception of how parts of an organization are interrelated to create a coherent flow of information both internally and externally. This is more clearly explained by looking at how the dynamic process of organizational communication has been largely impacted by the increase of new technology, such as the use of social media within an organization.

Systems Theory

Systems Theory provides a way of conceptualizing the functioning of an organization. Almaney (1974) views the organization itself as a dynamic process that consists of multiple interactions taking place within the organization as well as with external sources. These constant interactions that occur within an organization, or the communication that takes place, constitute the survival and success of an organization. The efficiency of an organization's communication is the determining factor of how well the organization functions to achieve objectives, as well as how the organization will continue to develop. Systems theory has offered a more comprehensive view of an organization and its dependant components that constitute the growth and stability of the organization (Almany, 1974). Poole (1997) claimed that Systems Theory is designed to take a holistic view of the complexity of an organization. This includes the various levels of communication and interactions between members in such a precise way that it will justify how these parts become interdependent within the organization. Systems Theory has offered a significant perspective or frame of the effects that communication can have within an organization.

In the past Systems Theory has been utilized to study communication, more specifically organizational communication, from a variety of perspectives, which has helped to develop the growing body of research that is

seen today. One example of this research is Chin's (1966) study on the openness and closeness of an organization. In his research, Chin refers to the permeable boundaries, or the ability for information to flow freely in and out of an organization. These permeable boundaries allow for the transformation of inputs, outputs, and throughputs, which ultimately determines the openness of an organization. Hickson III (1973) looked more specifically at how organizations adapt their internal function and structure to meet environmental needs through communication. Therefore it is through communication that organizations are able to adapt their products, services, and information to meet external requests, complaints, and demands of the consumers. Previous research on the Systems Theory has ultimately demonstrated that communication and the transmission of information is one of the most important components in the analysis and functioning of an organization. An application of the Systems Theory will provide a framework for the current study to look at how social media continues to perpetuate the flow of information in the workplace and how this has affected the organizational communication that occurs with external sources.

Systems Theory in organizational communication. Systems Theory has demonstrated how communication holds together each component of the organization, both internally and externally, in order to insure stability, organizational growth, and goal attainment (Almaney, 1974). According to Gunaratne (2008), systems theorist Luhmann theorized that modern organizations each have their own 'communication medium' that determines how it interacts with its environment. Modaff et al. (2009), claimed that communication is what maintains the flow of relevant information within an organization, therefore confirming that it is necessary for all organizations to be concerned with information processing, as it is "at the very least, one of the most important factors in the analysis and functioning of organizations (Hickson III, 1973, p. 8). Almaney (1974) states that, "it is inconceivable to have an organization without communication and is also inconceivable to have an efficient organization without efficient communication" (p. 42). Taken together, today this research resonates with how social media has become an efficient way to exchange information both within and externally. Therefore, suggesting that Systems Theory would be a workable approach from which to study the effectiveness of the use of social media in organizations.

Social Media

Social media has continued to have a dramatic effect on our society and the way that people communicate, interact, and define relationships by encouraging users to co-create and share information with others. According to Cavico, Mujtaba, Muffler, and Samuel (2013), "social media consists of web-based internet networks where users can share information and communicate with other users in a collective manner" (p. 26). Smith (2012) defined social media as "social interactions using technology (such as the internet and cell phones) with any combination of words, pictures, video, or audio" (p. 24). According to Smith (2012) this interactive process allows users to "communicate, socialize, sharing email, documents, pictures, video, audio files, and do each in a number of different ways" (p. 24).

Social media has created various platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, which have completely transformed the way that friends, family, co-workers, etc. communicate on a day to day basis through their participation in the creation and sharing of specific types of messages. Fischer and Reuber (2011) describe Facebook as "a social networking site" that has allowed for more efficient communication between friends, families, colleagues, and coworkers. Facebook has become the fastest growing and most popular social media website since it was founded in 2004.

Twitter, founded in 2006, has also gained a significant amount of attention due to its "ability to communicate in real-time short messages", which enables users to "relate by 'tweets'" or messages consisting of 140 characters or less (Waters & Williams, 2011, p. 354). Gelms (2012) states that "social media is even more prominent among the fastest growing private companies in the United States... eighty-three percent of these companies utilize at least one form of social media. Fifty-nine percent have corporate Twitter accounts, and 71% have a corporate Facebook profile" (p. 268).

As social media has continued to make a prominent impact on our culture and society, scholars across multiple disciplines have also continued to address social media in their research. For instance, in 2012 Khang, Ki, and Ye conducted a study that assessed the trends and patterns of research articles addressing the topic of social media in advertising, communication, marketing, and public relations. They discovered that while social media has continued to increase in each of the four discipline areas, an "overwhelming majority of social-media-related articles were published in communication journals (76.8%)" (p. 286). Their research revealed that social media has gained a substantial amount of attention from scholars and they suggest this is an attempt to stay in step with the growing popularity of this new communication platform. Taken together, social media could easily be considered a defining feature of modern culture and has become a central part of the way people communicate daily in both their social and professional relationships.

Social media in the workplace. As more forms of social media start to emerge, and the corporate world continues to become more competitive and complex, organizations are becoming involved in the implementation of social media to maintain their organizational status. Due to the ever growing popularity of social media use, organizations have placed a high importance on understanding how to appropriately manage the use of social media and understand its effectiveness (DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011). Social media has become an essential part of today's integrated organizational communication strategies for many workplaces, due to its inexpensive and "user-friendly" means of "sharing user-generated material" (Fischer & Reuber, 2011, p. 2).

The use of social media within an organization can have a positive impact on the consumer's experience because of its dynamic capability, allowing for the adjustment needs changing over time (Sashi, 2012). Sashi (2012), states that "as the exchange becomes more relational and the emotional bonds become stronger, customers become advocates for sellers in interactions with other customers and non-customers" (p. 268). Unlike traditional marketing techniques, this exchange of information between consumers and user-generated content has increased both satisfaction and advocacy, and built stronger customer engagement for organizations that have adapted the use of social media as a marketing strategy (Sashi, 2012).

While there are various reasons for its popularity, one identifiable quality that users like about social media is that it is an interactive process that allows individuals to engage in social interactions (Fischer & Reuber, 2011). Social media is a natural extension to the communication world that has provided organizations with the opportunity to interact and share information more frequently with consumers (Papasolomou & Melanthiou, 2012). Social media has altered the everyday communication that occurs both internally and externally, by enabling an interactive and dynamic process to occur between individuals and the organization. Social media has created an interactive dyadic dialogue that represents both the voices of user and the organization (Reitz, 2012). Consequently, organizations are becoming increasingly more attracted to establishing a social media presence to engage with consumers so that they may help shape their consumers' experiences and use them as leverage for a greater marketing impact (Lipsman, Graham, Rich, & Bruich, 2011). This also allows them to adjust accordingly to what they learn about their publics so as to improve the overall satisfaction of the publics' needs (Reitz, 2012).

In addition to the organizational impact that it has, social media can also enhance the reputation of the organization and generate organizational satisfaction because of the opportunity it presents to discover its consumers' opinions (Reitz, 2012). While it is important to organizations to consider incorporating the use of social media into their marketing strategies, it is also imperative that they consider how this interactive process will engage consumers in a rich and meaningful dialogue that will benefit the organization as well.

The use of social media has given consumers the expectation that they will engage as active participants of the organization. In order to be successful in their social media strategies, organizations need to remember that consumers are in control of their online experiences. Therefore, organizations must give consumers a valid reason to engage electronically by providing them with a unique and customizable experience. In order to do so, organizations must first consider consumer motivations to use social media. Organizations should generate a social media marketing strategy that aims to bring consumers' experiences to the front (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). The use of social media allows for "multiple voices as well as targeted communication, simultaneous wider reach and richness, and combined consumption and production of rhetorical content" (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2011, p. 121). Social media can also pose implications for an organizations' reputation among its consumers.

Implications of social media use in the workplace. While this interactive process between organizations and consumers can provide an organization with information to adapt to the changing needs of consumers, using social media can also pose a potential risk if organizations are not careful. DiStaso, McCorkindale, and Wright (2011) interviewed public relations executives to determine the impact of social media on their organizations. One participant stated that the greatest risk for an organization is to "ignore social media and to allow conversation to happen without awareness or participation" (p. 326).

Despite evidence suggesting that organizations need to better adapt to this new system of communication, research shows that most organizations are still engaging in one way communication, and responding minimally to consumers through social media (Waters & Williams, 2011). This lack of control and one-way interactions can make an organization susceptible to sometimes misguided actions of some social media users. According to DiStaso et al. (2011), it is often difficult for organizations to accept "the lack of control associated with social media and not knowing what people might say or do" (p. 326). Therefore, in order to maintain as much regulation as possible, it is imperative that organizations consistently participate in these ongoing interactions so that they may avoid both internal and external negative consequences. While social media may pose potential risks for an organization, this research will seek to interpret, from an executive's perspective, if and how the benefits of social media outweigh these risks as well as how it has ultimately affected the way that organizational communication occurs within an organization, with consumers, and with the public.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

While the relationship that social media has enabled between organizations and their publics has been examined, there is a lack of research focusing on the relationships that social media helps to maintain between coworkers and within the organization itself. Consequently the first research question is posed:

RQ1: From an executive's perspective, how has social media affected an organization's internal communication?

As social media continues to become a growing industry and not just a trend, further research on this topic will provide useful information that can be utilized to better adapt to a new method of communication for an organization. This leads to the second research question:

RQ2: From an executive's perspective, how has social media affected the way that organizational communication occurs with consumers and with the public?

METHODS

This research was intended to uncover the effect that social media has had on organizations both internally and externally from an executive's perspective. In order to better understand the research methods, paradigm, and how the study was executed, detailed explanations are given for each in this section. It will include a justification of the research questions, who participated, and how each furthered the research about how the use of social media has affected organizational communication. This section will provide a better understanding of the structure and scope of this research.

Method Description

This study operated under the interpretive research paradigm and was qualitative in nature, because, according to Keyton (2011), "qualitative methodologies have a theoretical interest in how people understand and interpret communication processes" (p. 58). More specifically, this research aimed to interpret individual perceptions of human interactions within a certain context. Therefore, the interpretive paradigm was chosen for this research project to obtain rich, descriptive data through in-depth interviews with each participant so as to facilitate a deeper understanding of social media as a form of corporate communication within the context of the organization itself. In the past, most research done on social media has been quantitative in nature, however using a qualitative approach in this study not only guided new interpretations of the use of social media, but also complimented existing research.

Participants

The target population for this study included executives from companies that have implemented social media as a typical process of their corporate communication and who often oversee this process occur both within and outside of an organization. According to Keyton (2011), "representativeness is the goal in selecting a sample from a population" (p. 123), therefore in recruiting participants, in order to have a representative sample of the population, I utilized non random sampling, more specifically snowball sampling which allowed me to interview eleven participants. The sample consisted of five men and six women holding an executive position at their current place of employment. Four of the participants had an established relationship with me prior to the interview, and provided references for more interview participants. This sampling method was most appropriate for this study because a sample of executives provided information on the dyadic interactions that occur through social media within an organization, as well as how the organization's use of social media allows them to interact with the public. Furthermore, this data provided information to make a substantial argument on how social media has affected the success of an organization both internally and externally.

Measurement

In order to accurately assess the use of social media as a method of organizational communication, it is essential to gain the opinions and ideas of those who this new phenomenon has directly impacted. According to Esterberg (2002), interviews are used to "understand what life is like from perspectives other than our own" (p. 87). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were utilized to carry out this research, which allowed for a more natural flow of conversation to occur, making the exchange of information "more like a 'real' conversation, with the interviewer and the interviewee both participating in the dialogue" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 88).

Prior to conducting the interviews, an interview protocol was designed to guide the process with the participants. As cited in Keyton (2011), according to Rubin and Rubin (2005), questions were developed to gain insightful information to fully address each research question in depth. The questions were pre-established, asked in

a strategic order, and open-ended so as to prompt discussion and maximize in-depth talk by the participant. The interview protocol was divided by research question. The first part addressed research question one by seeking to uncover how social media has affected internal organizational communication. The second half of questions that were posed sought to answer research question two by addressing the effect that social media has had on an organization's communication with its consumers and the public. Follow-up questions were asked to foster clarity of unspecific answers or to gain more insight of the participant's experiences and opinions.

Procedure

The initial step of the data collection process was to generate an informed consent form as well as an interview protocol. An informed consent form granted full knowledge to participants of the possible risks and benefits of the study. The interview protocol provided an open-ended framework for each interview to allow the participants to elaborate on their answers as they chose. In order to recruit participants snowball sampling was used.

Once participants were recruited, interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participant. Eleven semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, over the phone, or via Skype in private locations to ensure privacy to both the participant and the interviewer. Interviews lasted between 15 and 60 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed in detail following the interview. All names and personal information were altered to protect the confidentiality of the participant. All interview recordings were destroyed upon completion of data analysis.

Data Analysis

Once all interviews were complete and data were collected, thematic analysis was used to guide interpretations of the research. For this type of analysis, transcriptions were read thoroughly to establish familiarization, allowing for reoccurring themes and experiences to be drawn out from the text of the transcription in order to make a conclusive argument. Each research question was individually addressed using axial coding to analyze the data creating connections between categories and subcategories to generate a meaningful network of thematic analysis. This process was repeated until no new categories emerged and existing categories no longer changed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes reviewed to ensure that they answered the proposed research question, and named accordingly.

Data were coded subjectively based on the description of each executive's experience with social media, which encompassed how both internal and external organizational communication occurs through the use of social media. This aligned well with the interpretive research paradigm because in coding the data this way, it allowed for an improved discernment of the way that people interact within a specific context, more specifically, the use of social media in an organization.

RESULTS

As social media becomes an omnipresent form of communication in today's society, executives have no choice, but to continue to strategize and assess how specific practices of these platforms have supported their organizations internally, as well as allowed for optimal engagement with their consumers and the public. Conclusive results of this study showed that this is an ongoing process that occurs due to the dynamic and progressive structure of this medium and the individual characteristics of the organization itself.

Upon completion of coding and thematic analysis of the eleven interview transcriptions, three themes, and eight subthemes were found to support research question one, while three themes and nine subthemes emerged for research question two. Each of the themes has been further discussed so as to yield a greater understanding of the participants' experiences.

RQ1: From an executive's perspective, how has social media affected an organization's internal communication?

Research question one was designed to explore how executives believe that social media has altered the way that communication occurs between the employees themselves. The purpose of this question was to understand how social media has affected the internal communication of the organization. Each of the emergent themes is discussed in depth below.

Table 1.

Emergent Themes Regarding Executive's Views of Social Media's Effect on Internal Organizational Communication

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1. Personal and Professional Accounts Overlap
 - a. Connecting with Other Professionals

- b. Research
 - c. Twitter Direct Message
 - 2. Impacts Relationship
 - a. Extension to Relationship
 - b. Keep Relationship Separate
 - c. Positive Overall, Can be Negative
 - 3. Always Represent Organization
 - a. Not a Policy, But...
 - b. Against Policies
-

Professional and personal accounts overlap

The tendency of personal accounts to be used for professional reasons was the most prominent theme that emerged throughout this study. Nine of the eleven interview participants discussed various professional purposes that they use their personal accounts for on a day-to-day basis. When asked what she uses her personal social media account for while she is work, Maria replied:

I, at times, use my personal account to advocate for my professional work... I have it on and off throughout the day, because I find that even personally my connections – both personal and professional that I have through Facebook – sometimes that's the vehicle that which I'm organizing, arranging, and setting things up.

This response demonstrates the nature in which social media has assimilated into the organizational culture. In addition to utilizing their personal social media accounts to advocate for their organizations amongst their personal contacts, some participants also expanded on how this use of social media has ultimately benefited the organization. Kathie illustrated this through her example:

Our media officials started having contests amongst themselves to see who can give us the best picture in two steps. They're giving us content to put on social, and then they're measure who gets the most likes or retweets on that picture. So that's extremely effective because now they're sourcing more content, better content, and they're creating their own incentives for doing so. So everybody wins. The fan wins because they're seeing more and better stuff, and I win because that's content I wouldn't have gotten otherwise.

Most participants shared information about utilizing their personal social media accounts for more general purposes while they are at work, while others were more specific about the use social media for professional uses, therefore three major subthemes appeared within this category.

Connecting with Other Professionals. More than half of the participants specified that the reason they use their personal account while they are at work is to create a connection with other professionals. Most often this included industry professionals, corporate partners, and business prospects. Many of the participants, when asked why they use their personal accounts to connect with other professionals, responded that it enabled them to build a broader network in which they were able to create a more personal relationship. These participants felt that in doing so, it enhanced the business relationship as well as made him or her more reputable as a professional. Jennifer demonstrated this through her example of past experiences:

My colleagues at the agencies I worked with prior to here – I saw them really able to expand their professional influence through their social media sites... I think in terms of being able to use those sites to comment on things that are industry specific or skill specific really enhances your marketability. It's interesting what people will start associating you with because of what you tweet out, or post on Facebook professionally.

Despite this being a common use of personal social media accounts at work, many of the participants also stated that this could depend on the organization.

Research. In addition to using personal social media accounts to create a connection with other professionals, four participants felt that this type of medium provides a practical outlet for professional research. The most common types of research that were found to be done using social media were for industry trends, new hires, and potential business prospects. When talking about the use of her personal social media account during work hours, Maria stated:

Another example of work related reasons that I'm on my Facebook page or on social media throughout the day is that we have a lot of corporate partners. So, a lot of times we will be looking at and watching what their announcing, or how their using it [social media], or trying to get different ideas of what they're doing. So, I use it in almost a research context while I'm at work.

While this was often considered to be beneficial for the organization, some participants believed there to be drawbacks as well, including, but not limited to, getting sidetracked or misconceptions that it was being used for personal reasons at work.

Twitter direct message. Finally, four of the participants also said that it was not uncommon for them to contact another employee or co-workers through social media for work purposes. While the majority of the participants stated that they prefer to connect using “traditional” forms of communication, such as face-to-face, or via email or phone, most of the participants mentioned that they are aware that social media is becoming valued communication source in the workplace. When asked about this type of communication, Jennifer said:

I find that increasingly the people who are just coming out of college communicate more by text and through their social media sites rather than through email or phone. That’s just what they’ve grown up with. If they prefer to be reached out to in that way, then I use those channels. I don’t see them avoiding face-to-face meetings, I just see that is not their first reaction.

Furthermore, while this medium has enabled employees and co-workers to be in constant connection with one another, some participants mentioned how this can also be problematic because it creates an expectation to be available at all times. According to Kevin it is also important to distinguish when it is appropriate to contact other employees as well, “You have to also respect people’s off times as well – when their with they’re family or wherever it might be, you can’t just assume that at any given time someone can drop what they are doing and reply to a message.”

Impacts relationship

When asked about using their personal social media accounts to connect with co-workers outside of work, seven participants agreed that this enhanced their relationships at work, while four participants said that they preferred to keep their professional and personal lives separate. Even so, most of the participants saw the overall benefits of utilizing social media to form a relationship with co-workers outside of work. Three subthemes emerged within this category.

Extension to relationship. Most participants generally found that having the extra connection outside of work through social media enables them to establish good rapport with their employees or co-workers. Often participants felt that utilizing this form of communication would give them a more rounded perspective of who somebody is and extend upon the relationship they have already formed within the workplace. Jennifer spoke about how she believes that this type of communication medium has affected her in past experiences:

I found that through social media we were sharing experiences with others outside of work... I really saw that enhance the relationships that they brought back into the office. That was great. It brought us closer as an agency because we were sharing experiences outside of work and by default your relationship with them felt stronger in the office.

In addition, participants not only discussed how this helps to further develop their work relationships, but also how it has ultimately benefited the organizational atmosphere as well. When asked about how she believes it has changed the overall environment of her organization, Maria replied:

I found that it depends on the culture of the organization. Because we are very team-oriented, and everybody is really for each other, I find that this helps to connect on a personal level... So, I feel like it gives me little better sense of who they are as people, which helps me to relate to them better in the workplace.

While Paul does not feel that it is necessary to connect with co-workers himself, he still finds that a camaraderie derives from this type of interaction that he feels benefits the organization, “As a supervisor, I want people thinking team all the time... So, I don’t discourage it at all, certainly as long as it’s not on work time if it’s personal.”

Lastly, participants felt that connecting through social media outside of work was particularly beneficial when hiring new employees because it creates a conversation where there might not otherwise be. When discussing how he feels his organization has benefitted from social media, Matt said:

It opens the door to get to know people a little bit better. I also think, in a way, it tells you a lot about the person by what they’re posting. You can usually tell if the person has good judgment and the kind of employee they’ll be by what they’re posting on social. When we hire new people and become Facebook friends, or follow each other on Twitter, you almost get to know them more so on social first because they’ll share something they might not have talked about at work. If I see something on Facebook then I can bring it up in person, so I think it’s like an icebreaker that way too.

Keep relationship separate. Even though most participants felt that social media extended their relationships outside of the organizational culture, there were a few individuals who preferred to keep their

professional and personal lives separate. When asked about the relationships she has with her co-workers on social media, Linda said:

The people that report to me I have intentionally not friended on Facebook just because I think that should be separate. I want them to be able to say that they want to say to their friends, and I want to be able to say and post what I want. There isn't anything that I don't want them to see, but at the same time that just isn't appropriate. I need that personal space there.

Additionally, some participants favor keeping their relationship separate because they did not want to impose on their employee's private lives. During his interview Paul stated, "Respecting the lines of supervisor and employee, I'm not contacts or friends with them. I don't want them thinking that I'm monitoring what they're posting. I don't want to limit their personal creativity."

It should be noted that the participants who did not want their professional and personal lives to have that intersection on social media had a higher status than most of the employees in their organization.

Positive overall, but can be negative. Six of the eleven participants also mentioned that while they think that social media can have a positive influence on organizational communication, if it is used in an inappropriate manner it can lead to negative implications as well. Areas of concern for the participants included: less face-to-face interactions, jealousy, posting inappropriate content, and causing the friendship to supersede work relationship. Kathie illustrated this idea during her interview:

Because we have that extra connection outside of work that gives us an extra point that we can establish good rapport. So, I tend to think of it as mostly positive. I think some people though, if they are not careful about what they're posting or who sees it, then that obviously can have some negative effects too.

Always represent organization

The final theme that emerged from research question one illustrated how the use of personal social media accounts can directly impact the organization itself, and how executives communicate this within the organization. Issues that arose from this were most commonly associated with using social media to disparage the organization, violate confidentiality, or post questionable content. Maria gave an example of this during her interview:

We had a high profile person who was connected to our organization post a personal opinion about a hot button topic – relative to race or religion, and there were very negative implications from that. It was a cross between she meant it personal, but yet she was associated with that particular organization. I recognize this, because I'm in communications, that when I post on my social media I am representing myself, but because I am also connected my organization, on some level I am representing them as well. I understand that. Do I think everybody does? No, but I think that people are becoming more aware of this.

Each of the participants stated that their employees were made aware that they were expected represent the organization in an appropriate manner on social media in order to prevent these types of situations. Two subthemes emerged that were most common among the participants for how this was communicated, they are described here.

Not against policies, but... More than half of the participants felt that although social media use was not directly stated in their policies, they had not experienced many issues with it because employees were counseled on the appropriateness of use or made aware through direct association. When asked how this is communicated in her organization, Jennifer replied, "If you don't know how to behave already, you learn it as part of your profession... I think you come to realize the power of social media and what it can do to a reputation." However, during his interview, Paul stated that at his organization it was simply an expectation they had for their employees:

Part of it is, you have to expect and hope that your staff is professionals too. You don't want to be overbearing about stating the rules that are obvious, unless you do hear about it or see it happening. So part of it is just showing your respect to them. They are professionals, so outside of that we haven't come up with any department specific policies.

Against policies. While this subtheme was found to be less frequent in the study, four of the participants said that there were expectations about the use of social media directly stated in their organization's policies. These policies most often included the use of social media during office hours and representing the organization positively. Kathie illustrated these types of policies through an example at her organization:

We have set employee guidelines on social, which we've had in place for three or four years. Mostly, take responsibility for what you're posting, we have the right to review it, and don't be stupid – use your best judgment. So now that we have the guidelines in place, I don't know if anyone has gotten in trouble.

Throughout the study some participants also said that social media has been increasingly incorporated into initial human resources training for new employees as a way to teach them how to be responsible.

RQ2: From an executive's perspective, how has social media affected the way that organizational communication occurs with consumers and with the public?

Whereas research question one was intended to elicit an understanding of how social media has affected the organizational communication that occurs within the organization itself, the purpose of research question two was to develop a greater sense of how organizations have begun to utilize this form of communication to interact with their consumers and with the public, and uncover how this has affected the external organizational communication. The three themes and six subthemes that emerged from research question two are identified in table two, and discussed in depth below.

Table 2.
Emergent Themes Regarding Executive's Views of Social Media's Effect on External Organizational Communication

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1. Consistency and Integrity Lead to Effectiveness
 - a. Challenge to Find Effective Strategy
 - b. Professional Responses
 2. Mainstay of Communication
 - a. Building Brand Awareness
 3. Engagement
 - a. Assessment
 - b. Immediate Gratification
 - c. Industry Expertise
-

Consistency and integrity lead to effectiveness

Every participant in this study stated that the more resources, time, and commitment that can be devoted to social media the more effective it will be in engaging an audience. Two subthemes emerged within this category that outlines the most prominent issues organizations face when trying to effectively utilize social media to interact with their consumers and the public.

Challenge to find effective strategy. Each of the eleven participants agreed that the greatest challenge of implementing social media within their organization is finding an effective strategy to maintain it. Many organizations have found it to be difficult to be proactive as opposed to reactive with social media due to the ever changing algorithms of each medium. Paul illustrated this well in the example he gave:

I think that it presents a challenge for everyone, not just for us. What social media is going to be the darling of tomorrow? Where do you need a presence next? That industry changes more than any industry I can give you an example of, and I think that's part of the challenge for us. By the time we figure out how to make LinkedIn work right, there's probably going to be something else. So, the challenge is, where do you invest your resources? Especially when we don't have somebody allocated to do it, we have to really limit what we're doing. I'd rather be in three or four mediums and doing them okay, than be in eight and doing none of them the right way. It's such a difficult environment to be in because it changes daily, so what we're doing right today may not be right tomorrow. There's not a plan that works for every group on every social medium, so you need different plans for each group and different plans for each social medium – I don't know if anyone is there yet.

Along with Paul, it was common among many of the other participants that one of the greatest difficulties of employing an effective strategy for social media is the lack of resources that the organization has, more specifically, most organizations did not have a specific person who was responsible for social media. When discussing this, Ann said:

It's effective, but it's not as effective as it could be just because I don't currently have the time to devote like I want to. But, I bet that if I really had a dedicated person that was helping me I really think I would be great. I think it could actually increase business.

Lastly, the participants whose organizations did not have an employee hired to do social media deemed it more necessary to be consistent and only have platforms they were able to manage, rather than have an account on every social media site. When speaking about this topic Maria stated:

Obviously since we are a nonprofit we don't have the luxury of having too many resources to apply for it [social media], so that's why we really try to be strategic about what we do and only get on platforms that we can manage and that we think will help market and communicate what we're doing.

Commonly, it was found that organizations concentrated on putting what limited resources they had into where their target audience was most apt to be.

Professional responses. In order to maintain the integrity of the organization, participants shared that they must be strategic when responding to something negative that has been posted on their social media sites from an outside source. All of the participants said that their organization has a system in place to deal with these types of posts. Actions included responding to the comment and asking to take the conversation offline, ignoring the comment, or deleting the comment all together. This often depended on the circumstances of the situation, but a majority of the participants agreed that appropriate responsiveness was the best way to handle this.

Mainstay of communication

All eleven of the participants consented that social media is no longer a choice for the organization of whether or not to be on it, but rather an expectation that consumers and the public have. Furthermore, social media has developed into a mainstay of communication, and therefore, in order to be a competitor in any industry, organizations must become strategic on social media sites by engaging with their consumers, being responsive, and monitoring the conversations that happen there. According to Maria, “so many people are spending their time on social media these days, so if an organization didn’t do any of it, they would just simply not be part of the conversation.” This is not something that most organizations are willing to compromise.

Results also showed that not only do social media allow an organization to converse more directly with their consumers and the public, but it has also driven better responsiveness and higher quality at a much faster rate. Organizations are now able to publicize information so quickly in ways that was not possible before. In reference to these results, Dave stated, “I think more people should embrace it for what it can do and use it effectively.” One subtheme also emerged from this category.

Building brand awareness. In addition to just being part of the conversation that takes place on social media, participants believe that it is also necessary to have a valuable presence there so that consumers can be proud of their brand. In other words, it is not enough for consumers to simply be able to put a face to the organization. Rather, organizations should strive to improve their reputation using social media in order to make their brand resonate more with their consumers and the public, and also to give their consumers a reason to build a deeper connection with the organization. For Kathie, social media is about “making fans better fans,” and that is her organization’s principle for social media.

Furthermore, participants agreed that social media is a place to expand an organization’s audience, and any negativity could have dire implications on the success of the organization. During her interview Ann stated:

I really, *really* work hard at the integrity of our posts and I will never be a neigh-sayer, or someone that is speaking negatively to another creative partner, or using it as a soapbox. I don’t think that social media for business is a place for politics, and I also don’t think that it’s a place to bash people. You know, all you have is your name and if you don’t use it wisely, then it’s all going to come back to you negatively.

Engagement

The final theme that was prominent throughout each interview was the engagement that organizations had with their consumers and with the public. This theme was broken down into four subthemes in order to more fully understand how engagement has ultimately impacted the external organizational communication that occurs.

Assessment. Over half of the participants stated that they prefer to assess the effectiveness of social media through engagement rather than analytics. Forms of engagement included, but were not limited to, shares, comments, and retweets. During her interview, Jennifer explained why interaction and engagement was more important for her to see:

If you’re on Facebook, you can like anything and not really be engaged. It’s the assessment of the engagement – are these people frequently posting comments to your post, are they retweeting, are they mentioning you in their blog – it’s the engagement that gives you a deeper line of sight into whether your message is effective.

Immediate gratification. Social media has exposed organizations to their consumers and the public like never before. Consumers are much more empowered and have a bigger voice through the direct interaction that they now have with any organization. As previously stated, it is a set expectation to have this direct interaction. Moreover, immediate gratification is becoming a standard. Results indicated that organizations no longer have the luxury of time to attend to a request or concern, because “expectations are so high in terms of short patience.” However, this gives organizations the opportunity to become more actionable, and in doing so develop a “more long-term, advocate-based” relationship with their consumers. While some organizations are reluctant to establish social media sites because they feel a loss of control over the conversation and are worried that attention will be

brought to them for negative reasons, most participants believe that it is still imperative for an organization to maintain a presence there. Linda addressed this by stating:

Social media has given people a voice in a way that they have never had before; so powerfully and so quickly. Organizations better be paying attention, because whether or not you're doing social media, you're in it. You're part of it, whether you want to be or not.

Industry expertise. Lastly, in terms of how consumers and the public are being engaged using social media, a majority of the participants said that their organizations often post pieces that reflect their industry expertise and allow them to create a conversation around it. This content frequently includes, but is not limited to, editorial content, industry-related articles, consumer trends, and new hires. Rather than posting about their own organization, participants liked to see that social media was being utilized for reputation building in the professional world. When asked about what content her organization posts regularly, Jennifer replied:

If there's a trend in the industry, or if we foresee a trend, we will post about why that's happening or what's its effects are doing. It positions you as a thought leader, as a company that's on the cutting edge – if they're not developing trends at least they're on the leading edge of trends. I think that's the biggest thing – to provide an additional perspective on the industry, on where the industry is headed, and what kinds of services could and should be provided.

DISCUSSION

As this research suggests there are ways that social media has affected both internal and external organizational communication. As social media has developed into one of the most utilized forms of communication today, research has indicated various ways in which it has been incorporated into the organizational setting. Results from the current study support some of these previous findings.

Results from this study support the results from Santra and Giri's (2009) study that was previously discussed in the review of literature. Santra and Giri (2009) concluded that computer-mediated communication (CMC) has improved organizational members' abilities to communicate effectively. Participants in the current study expressed that being able to expand their relationship by sharing experiences outside of work has enhanced their relationship inside of the organization as well, which has intimately benefited the organizational communication that occurs. However, results of this study also contradict what found in Santra and Giri's (2009) study, because they indicate that some individuals prefer to keep their professional and personal lives separate in order to respect personal boundaries and because they also feel that it is most appropriate for the organizational culture. Conclusively, this demonstrates that how the use of social media affects the internal organizational communication is dependent upon the culture of the organization itself.

Results of this research are also consistent with previous findings that unlike traditional marketing methods, social media is an interactive process that has increased both direct engagement with an organization, and satisfaction (Sashi, 2012). In addition, results from this study indicate that not only do social media increase the amount of direct interaction with consumers and the public, but it has also increased the quality of responsiveness, which is happening at a much faster rate. Furthermore, all of the participants in this study agreed that social media is no longer a choice, but rather an expectation for an organization.

Finally, the results of this study also aligned well with the research of systems theorist Luhmann utilized in Gunaratne's (2008) study, which stated that modern organizations each have their own 'communication medium' that determines how it interacts with its environment. Conclusive results of the current study indicated that the use of social media as a form of communication within the organization is dependent upon the structure of culture of the organization itself and its employees.

Additionally, this research also supported the findings of Hickson III's (1973) research which focused specifically on Systems Theory and how organizations use communication to adapt their internal structure to meet external needs. Participants of the current study stated that because social media has given consumers the power to interact directly with a company through this medium, this has caused organizations to become more actionable and generate a deeper connection with their consumers and the public, which, in turn, has a direct effect on the external organizational communication. Taken together, this signifies that the Systems Theory was an appropriate framework for the current study to work under.

LIMITATIONS

This research had two primary limitations. The main limitation of this research study was the different organizations that executives came from. Neither of the research questions specified a particular type of organization that was going to be studied. Therefore participants were selected from a variety of industries. For

instance, a healthcare facility and a public relations agency are two very different organizations, and consequently, the participants' experiences differed depending upon which organization they came from. Participants in the public relations or marketing industries were often encouraged to utilize social media for research and other professional purposes, while, social media is often prohibited in any healthcare facility so as to protect the confidentiality of the patients and organization. Different themes may have emerged if the study had been focused to a specific type of organization.

Sample size was also a limitation of this study. Originally, fifteen participants were desired to complete the research. While the eleven interviews that were conducted provided a sufficient amount of data in order for many common themes to emerge from, the amount of participants was still lacking. If more than eleven participants had been involved in this study it would have more reliably reflected the population. Furthermore, it would have been more appropriate to generalize the results of the data.

Future Research

As discussed previously, participants from various organization types may have altered the themes that resulted from this study. Accordingly, it would be valuable for future research to explore a specific type organization to determine how social media has affected organizational communication within that industry.

In addition, while this study aligned well with the Systems Theory, many of the themes that emerged from the data indicated opposing, but interdependent forces within the context of the interview transcripts. For instance, the theme "Overall Positive, but Can be Negative" illustrated these tensions, because while participants believed that social media had an overall positive effect on work relationships, they still thought that there could be negative implications as well. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future research to study how social media affects organizational communication from the lens of the Relational Dialects Theory.

In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that social media has affected organizational communication within an organization and with the public. Most participants stated that social media has increased the success of their organization, while very few participants found it to be detrimental to the organization's overall success. These results were correlated with the industry of the organization. This extension of research has provided information and interpretations that can be utilized to better adapt to the use of social media as a growing method of organizational communication within the corporate world.

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