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### Super PACs and Strong Relationships: The Impact of Digital Interaction on the Political Organization-Public Relationship

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# Super PACs and Strong Relationships: The Impact of Digital Interaction on the Political Organization–Public Relationship

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Contributing to the development of digital political public relations scholarship, this study examines the political organization–public relationship cultivated via social media. Using Twitter as a vehicle, this posttest-only experimental design looked at whether interaction with a political organization facilitated a relationship. Furthermore, the study examined whether that relationship might manifest into political support. Results indicate active engagement (tweeting at an organization), even for a short term, increases the sense that there is a real conversational exchange, enhancing the organization–public relationship. Internal political disposition such as political cynicism, political information efficacy, or strength of ideology in some cases can help predict organization–public relationship.

With each passing year and election cycle, more politicians and political groups are using tools such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter in their communication with voters, constituents, and citizens. Use of digital and social media in political communication has transitioned in recent years from novelty to necessity (Pearson & O’Connell, 2012). Political public relations scholars have been investigating how these tools are being used including the overarching theory of organization–public relationships (OPRs; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011).

Traditionally, political candidates and organizations had to use an intermediary, such as a newspaper or television station, to amplify their message and actively engage in the agenda-building process. However, digital and social media provides more direct route to their publics, while allowing a sense of control over the message as it is disseminated. Previous studies of political use of digital and social media (e.g., Solop, 2010; Stromer-Galley, 2000; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008; Taylor & Kent, 2004) reveal most political uses provide informational

messages without a high level engagement, although that trend is slowly shifting (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008).

In this investigation, scholars used relationship theory as a foundation and investigated it in a political public relations context to examine how noncandidate political groups used Twitter in the 2012 primary election season.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Using the context of political public relations (Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011), this study applies the political organization–public relationship (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011) framework to assess the impact of interactivity with a noncandidate politically oriented group in social media. To analyze this framework, we used a foundation of previous research revolving around relationship and interaction: organization–public relationships (OPRs), political public relations, and digital media. Relationship theory, considered one of the most heuristic theories in public relations (Salot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, Jones, 2003) is at play here, operationalized through OPR as the dependent variable.

### OPR

Ferguson (1984) first discussed the importance of studying relationships in public relations theory and research. Since then, the study of OPRs is foundational to the development of public relations theory and practice. Although public relations scholars waited nearly a decade to take up much of the research, many (e.g., Brunig, 2000; J. E. Grunig, 1993; Ledingham, 2003) have since established OPRs as a crucial aspect of successful public relations.

Relationship management research has expanded to examine various areas of public relations. Whether examined from the perspective of the organization (Seltzer, 1999) or that of the publics (Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014), the importance of relationship and its proper management have been justified (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). Developing relationship management is crucial for a number of reasons, but the theory and practice of OPRs could transition public relations from one-way to two-way communication posited a relationship of prominent aspect of practice (J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000). To this end, scholars have examined the concept through multiple lenses and from different perspectives. For example, the process both the organization and public undertake in ensuring a balance of mutual interests was explored by Ledingham (2006), and work such as Broom et al. (2001) have explored various definitions of OPRs. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) discussed the influential nature of relationships “in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural, or political well-being of the other” (p. 62).

The flow of communication has drastically changed with development of web-based tools. As the web developed, public relations practitioners investigated various ways to use digital channels in their maintenance of OPRs. White and Raman (1999) established the web as the first tool PR practitioners could utilize without going through the gatekeeping process of the mass media. Early Internet studies focused on web sites (e.g., Hallahan, 2000; Hill & White, 2000) and relationships with journalists (e.g., Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003; Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009). However, other scholars (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White,

2003; Vorvoreanu, 2006; Wright, 1998, 2001) examined in-depth how the web could be used to maintain OPRs.

As online content became more ubiquitous, scholars began to examine relationship theory at play across specific tools. Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) investigated using blogs in relationship building. Yang and Kang (2009) examined blogs to establish measuring engagement in OPR development. Scholars such as Bortree and Seltzer (2009) and Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) have examined the use of Facebook profiles for relationship management and communication. Wright and Hinson (2009) did an extensive study on how PR practitioners are using various forms of digital and social media. Findings included a drastic increase in the use of various tools, a change in how practitioners got their news and information, and how the use of these tools had significantly changed the communication between organizations and publics.

There are fewer studies available on Twitter because it has only become relevant in recent years. Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin (2011) used interviews with Red Cross employees to examine how the organization utilized Twitter to build and maintain relationships with its publics. Functionally, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) concluded that nonprofits strategically engage their publics in addition to using tweets for informational purposes. Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) used a content analysis of *Fortune* 500 company tweets, finding that there were some dialogic communication components present, advancing the use of Twitter beyond informational posts. Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, and Chowdhury (2009) went a step further and discussed the idea that companies have a different set of priorities than individuals when using Twitter. With that said, companies appeared more likely to tweet informational messages and follow up with engagement. These studies reveal a strong trend toward using digital and social media tools to build and maintain stronger relationships by deepening the understanding of how to most effectively utilize communication.

### Political Public Relations

The term *political public relations* has been described and defined in various ways (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Carroll & McCombs, 2003; Nimmo & Combs, 1983), but they all share the idea of approaching political communication through a strategic framework. To this point, Trammell (2006) discussed political public relations as an emerging area of research forging political communication and public relations theories. Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2011) defined political public relations as a “management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goal” (p. 8). The keyword in that definition and in other descriptions is *relationships*. To be successful, politicians, candidates, political organizations, and other political players all have to identify their publics and then establish and maintain relationships with them.

With that said, Strömbäck and Kiouisis (2011) established that “from a relational perspective, public relations success is not measured primarily by communication output or influence on the opinions of various publics, but by the quality relationships between an organization and its publics” (p. 19). A study by Jackson (2012) corroborates this notion. In that study,

the author analysed how political public relations was used during the 2010 UK general election at a local candidate level. Findings reveal that politicians understand the value of long-term strategies that facilitate the interaction with citizens and voters. On the other hand, a study by Xifra (2010) found that professionals involved with the public relations function for the main Spanish political parties “did not use PR tools to increase dialogue between citizens and political parties” (p. 181).

Political public relations scholars researching digital media and social media have spent much of their time focusing on individual tools (e.g., Kent, 2008; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005), situations (e.g., Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; Stromer-Galley & Baker, 2006), and comparisons with traditional media formats (e.g., McKinney & Rill, 2009).

### OPR in Political Public Relations

Although most political public relations scholarship has traditionally focused more on journalism-centric theories such as framing or agenda-setting, scholars have begun to examine OPR (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014). Using a qualitative approach to examine relationship in lobbying, a key political public relations function, Wise (2007) is credited as the first to examine political public relations through the relationship lens. Levenshush (2010) then looked at how campaign workers established relationships with voters through the Internet. The seminal quantitative test of political OPR occurred in Seltzer and Zhang’s survey of voters to understand antecedents to relationships formed with political parties. In the 2012 election, Sweetser and Tedesco empirically tested the impact of message and candidate exposure on voters’ relationship with a particular candidate.

### Social Media in Political Public Relations

With increased use of social media in political campaigns, social networking sites, microblogging sites, and blogs have been said to renew the sense of engagement between political organizations (e.g., parties, candidates, political action groups) and voters (e.g., Davis, 1999, 2005). According to Taylor and Kent (2004), “the Internet and the WWW can theoretically improve relationships between elected officials and their constituents” (p. 60). However, in their examination of 100 congressional web sites, Taylor and Kent (2004) found those politicians’ sites to be one-way communication channels and void of dialogue. As campaign technology has evolved, so, too, has the power of those digital spaces to enable grassroots support (e.g., Erwin, 2008; Fraser & Dutta, 2008; Stirland, 2008). Although not yet perfect, continued evolution of campaign tools show a trend toward more seemingly interactive opportunities, which at surface bridges what the scholars have criticized in the candidate-constituent relationship (Stromer-Galley, 2000). This reluctance is not limited to campaigns in the United States, as Karlsson, Clearwall, and Buskqvist (2013) noted similar trends continued during the Swedish national election in 2010. To this end, Trammell (2005) discussed how candidates utilized open thread posts to promote interaction from users that marked an “advancement in online campaigning as staff begin to embrace interactive tools and incorporate such tools into their overall strategy” (p. 11). Even so, scholars argued that true interaction was not quite realized, as in the case of Sweetser and Lariscy’s (2008) Facebook study of wall posts on candidate pages, which

revealed that very few candidates engaged in true dialogic communication. Campaigns followed technology adoption trends closely, and integrated Twitter in the 2008 election. This online tool provides users with ability to post 140 character messages seen by their followers. Not only was Twitter used by the campaigns, but it was also used by those following the campaigns. The microblogging creates a “moment-by-moment” view of the campaign, and affords citizens an insider’s perspective (Dickerson, 2008, p. 6). Dickerson also stated, “If written the right way, Twitter entries build a community of readers who find their way to longer articles because they are lured by these moment-by-moment observations” (p. 6).

Solop (2009) discussed how the Barack Obama’s 2008 Presidential campaign used Twitter to make history. Although the campaign only tweeted 262 times during the 17-month election cycle, they managed to gain about 118,000 followers. His opponent, John McCain, had fewer than 5,000. Conclusions established that Obama used Twitter to connect with his supporters on their terms, while allowing him to inform them. The campaign also utilized Twitter to direct traffic to their web site and donations, large and small, exhibiting a higher level of engagement. Solop (2010) stated, “Twitter and other social media tools also helped Obama construct an image of being a young, technologically sophisticated leader committed to connecting individual voters to a broader movement of change” (p. 47).

Obama was not the only political or government entity to use Twitter. Waters and Williams (2011) analyzed the tweets from 60 government agencies. Results revealed that organizations used Twitter for more one-way communication than two-way, more dialogic engagement. However, according to Hollingworth and Cooper (2011), more than 70% of digital and social media use will provide cost or strategic benefits. Pearson and O’Connell (2012) added, “In 2009, Twitter was a novelty in politics. In 2012, it’s a necessity” (p. 66). Research into political public relations’ uses of digital and social media, especially Twitter, is still developing.

## Hypotheses and Research Questions

Although there is documented research related to OPRs within political public relations (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014), this study seeks to expand on that research using a natural experiment. The foundation allows for a more specific exploration of the depth to which people interpret the dialogue and relationship with noncandidate political organizations. Social networking tools such as Twitter provide a place for online versions of typical social interactions. With this in mind, this experiment seeks to examine whether this type of engagement influences OPRs with political organizations.

This study explores how noncandidate political organizations use Twitter to establish and maintain these relationships. In a time where the definition of a political organization has changed and the use of digital media has increased drastically, it is crucial to examine how these changes influence citizens, especially young citizens who utilize them in the highest numbers.

Based on the literature reviewed, and the relatively new directions explored regarding OPR in the political context, the following research questions are posed:

- RQ1: Does engagement impact organization–public relationship?
- RQ2: How does one’s personal political disposition impact organization–public relationship?

## METHOD

Although public relations research has begun to examine relationship in the political organization–publics context, with rare exception (e.g., Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014) the quantitative studies to date have been surveys (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Sweetser, 2015), rather than controlled experiments that allow researchers to reveal the beginning of the cause and effect relationship between variables. Using an experiment where participants were exposed to organic content in social media during the early primary phases of the 2012 election, this experiment employed the Twitter account of a Super PAC group as the stimulus. As a posttest-only experiment with a control group, participants were randomly assigned to the interactive cell ( $n = 90$ ; follow Twitter user and tweet/retweet interactions with user organization at least once per week), noninteractive ( $n = 48$ ; follow Twitter user only), or control ( $n = 41$ ; merely have a Twitter account, no instructions on who to follow/interact with) for a period of approximately 2 weeks. After the stimulus phase, which lasted approximately 2 weeks, participants were sent a link to an online survey for the posttest questionnaire. The control group completed the same posttest questionnaire.

### Election 2012

This study was conducted prior to the national conventions during summer 2012. The 2012 Presidential election was one of the longest campaigns in history. Republican candidates began to make their announcements in March 2011, more than 18 months prior to Election Day. By May of that year, Republicans were holding their first of 20 primary debates. During the first year of the campaign, 10 Republican candidates ran for the nomination. By May 2012, there were four candidates remaining on the ballots in primary states: Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, Ron Paul, and Rick Santorum. Between May and August 2012, that number whittled down to just two: Mitt Romney, who would receive the Republican Party's official nomination, and Ron Paul, who did not support Romney as the party's nominee.

### Super PACs

This study uses a political action committee (called PACs, and recently Super PACs) to represent the organizational component of the OPR. Although lobbying has been studied in relation to political OPR, this study makes use of a more traditional organization format to represent the organization. PACs, as an organization entity in political public relations research, represent interesting opportunities because PACs typically work to support either an issue or a candidate, often without being officially (e.g., financially) affiliated with a political party. Even so, PACs may be confused by the voting public with candidates or campaigns.

PACs have a long history in election campaigns and provide structure for people to organize around issues and/or a political platform. However, that structure has changed drastically in recent years. In January 2010, the US Supreme Court issued the Citizens United ruling, paving the way for corporations to spend money in support of political causes in an unlimited way. The ruling established the following:

Political spending is a form of protected speech under the First Amendment, and the government may not keep corporations or unions from spending money to support or denounce individual



candidates in elections. While corporations or unions may not give money directly to campaigns, they may seek to persuade the voting public through other means, including ads, especially where these ads were not broadcast. (SCOTUS Blog)

Debates quickly arose about the influence of the ruling on elections at every level to follow. According to the *Wall Street Journal* (2013), “‘Super’ political action committees (PACs) can raise unlimited money from corporations, labor unions, and individuals. And Super PACs can spend that money supporting and opposing candidates in presidential and congressional races—just as long as they don’t directly coordinate with the campaigns.” Immediate impact was seen in the financial levels at which the wealthiest individuals and companies contributed and collected money for and against candidates and issues.

During the 2012 election, Super PACs spent more than \$547 million dollars on election campaigns for President, Senate, and House positions (*Wall Street Journal*, 2012). They spent approximately \$340 million just on the Presidential race, with more than \$148 million spent in opposition of Barack Obama (*Wall Street Journal*, 2012). These organizations also established a presence online with web sites, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts.

### Sample

This study focused on social media users to understand how interactivity would impact their relationship with a political organization online. A convenience sample of social media users, with Twitter accounts, was employed from a sample across three college campuses in the Southeast. The sample was predominately female ( $n = 145$ ; 81%) and about a quarter male ( $n = 33$ ; 18.4%); one participant did not indicate gender ( $n = 1$ ). The average age of participants was 22.42 years old ( $SD = 3.86$ ), with a range from 18 years old to 54 years old.

### Stimuli

To ensure the highest degree of ecological validity in this experiment, the stimulus was an actual Twitter account maintained during the primary season of the 2012 election. The very nature of Super PACs precluded us from selecting a nonpartisan group, so it was understood that some participants in the study may have a different ideology than the stimulus organization. The Super PAC Priorities USA Action 2012 was selected because, at the time, it was the most active of the leading Super PACs in that it posted content several times a day and also interacted with its followers through @ reply mentions or retweeting follower content. A wide variety of Super PAC Twitter accounts were reviewed; however the majority were either one-way bulletins or infrequent to post, which would have been detrimental to this natural experiment. On its Twitter bio, the Democratic-candidate-supporting group described itself as supporting “candidates who will advance policies that provide the strongest and most sound outcomes for middle class families” ([www.twitter.com/priorities2012](http://www.twitter.com/priorities2012)). According to the *New York Times* profile on the group, Priorities USA Action raised \$63.7 million dollars, and spent \$65.8 million on attack ads aimed at Mitt Romney (Ashkenas, Ericson, Parlapiano, & Willis, 2012).

The engagement conditions were set up such that a participant was randomly assigned to the interactive cell, the non-interactive cell, or the control group. The participants in the interactive

cell were instructed to follow the Super PAC on Twitter and told to interact with that account at least once a week for a 2-week period; this was considered a higher level of engagement. Interaction could be manifest as a tweet directed to the organization or a retweet of the organization's content. The noninteractive cell participants were told only to follow the organization Twitter account and provided no instruction for interaction; although there was not required interaction, this was considered a lower level of engagement, as following the organization is a baseline level of engagement. Control cell participants were simply required to have an active Twitter account and not given any instructions regarding the Super PAC Twitter stimulus. All participants provided their Twitter user names and were checked to ensure that their accounts were *public* or *open* for the duration of the study. Having a public account was critical so that the Super PAC would be able to see interactions from the users. We monitored the participants' accounts to ensure that each was following the instructions issued to his or her respective manipulation cell.

A manipulation check ensured that the participants understood the manipulation they were exposed to by asking what they did in the study. Results indicate that the manipulation was successful,  $\chi^2(4) = 200.65, p \leq .001$ .

### Instrument

The instrument was comprised of standard political and public relations constructs, which have been used widely in previous studies and developed further here. The measures included the relationship maintenance scale (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser, 2010; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014), political information efficacy (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2004, 2007), cynicism (Rosenstone et al., 1997), and various personal and political demographics.

The relational maintenance scale is one way to assess one's perception of their relationship with an organization, as well as the participant's perception of organization's viewpoint of that relationship. The scale has been employed in both online public relations studies to understand the OPR (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser, 2010), as well in political public relations to understand the candidate-constituent relationship (Sweetser, 2015; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014). Measuring 25 items on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), the scale included items about relational commitment, conversational human voice, task sharing, responsiveness/customer service, and positivity/optimism. The scale was factor analyzed using varimax rotation, resulting in a 6-factor solution, which explained 68.87% of the variance. See Table 1 for a full listing of items and factor loading scores and individual item mean scores used for this analysis.

Traditional political variables, such as political information efficacy and cynicism, were also gauged in this study. The Rosenstone et al. (1997) 8-item scale measured political cynicism and the Kaid et al. (2004, 2007) 4-item scale measured political information efficacy. In accordance with previous studies that have used these scales, each construct was summed into an index to create the cumulative cynicism score and the cumulative political information efficacy score, as described in Table 2.

Political demographic variables included political party identification as Democrat, Republican, or Independent. Party strength was measured on a 5-point semantic differential scale

TABLE 1  
Rotated Component Factor Loading Scores for Relationship With Super PAC

	<i>M</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
Commitment (alpha = .85)							
Stresses commitment	3.09	.81					
Implies a long-term relationship	2.94	.71					
Emphasizes relational quality	2.85	.65					
Communicates a desire to build a relationship	3.18	.63	.52				
Demonstrates a commitment to maintaining a relationship	3.16	.56	.52				
Symmetrical communication (alpha = .74)							
Communicates in an human voice	3.35		.68				
Tries to be interesting	3.37		.69				
Treats us as human	3.36		.65				
Open to dialogue	3.26		.54				
Provides links to competitors	3.10		.48				
Positivism & accountability (alpha = .85)							
Uses a positive/optimistic tone	3.07			.78			
Expresses cheer & optimism about future	3.00			.73			
Provides prompt/uncritical feedback when addressing criticism	2.97			.65			
Admits mistakes	3.02			.62			
Willing to address complaints/queries	3.07			.61			
Relational responsibility (alpha = .82)							
Directly addresses organizational responsibilities	3.29				.79		
Discusses the nature of the organization	3.33				.75		
Performs organizational responsibilities	3.37				.68		
Does not shirk duties	3.08				.62		
Humanizing (alpha = .78)							
Uses a sense of humor	2.76					.74	
Communicates in a conversational style	3.15					.73	
Attempts to make communication enjoyable	3.19					.54	
Invites us into conversation	3.19					.43	
Responsive communication (alpha = .79)							
Answers telephone calls from me/others	2.88						.90
Answers e-mail from me/others	3.00						.86
Variance explained		38.3%	8.14%	6.48%	5.76%	5.4%	4.73%

Note. Items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.

ranging from weak to strong. Voting participation items were asked, such as whether the participant intended to vote in the 2012 election and for whom the participant might vote.

## RESULTS

This study used a two-cell plus control group post-test only experimental design deployed across three Southeastern universities. The interactive tweet cell ( $n = 90$ ) were asked to follow the Super PAC Twitter account and engage the political account, whereas the non-interactive follow cell ( $n = 48$ ) was merely asked to follow the political organization without any requirements for

TABLE 2  
Political Cynicism and Political Information Efficacy

	<i>M</i>
Political Cynicism Index (alpha = .62)	26.20
Whether or not I vote has no influence on politics	2.34
One never knows what politicians think	3.43
People like me don't have any say about what the government does	2.44
Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on	2.92
One can(not) be confident that politicians always do the right thing	4.08
Politicians often quickly forget their election promises after a political campaign is over	3.58
Politicians are more interested in power than in what the people think	3.44
One cannot always trust what politicians say	3.97
Political Information Efficacy Index (alpha = .90)	11.95
I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics	2.93
I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people	2.78
I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country	3.39
If a friend asked me about the election, I feel I could have enough information to help my friend figure out who to vote for	2.89

interaction. The control cell participants ( $n = 41$ ) were simply Twitter users, not given special instructions beyond continuing their use of the social media tool.

The participants were asked how often they used different media. They reported using technological media such as Internet ( $M = 192.26$  min;  $SD = 177.49$ ), television ( $M = 85.29$  min;  $SD = 122.77$ ), and radio ( $M = 60.89$  min;  $SD = 95.77$ ) more often than traditional print media like newspapers ( $M = 6.88$  min;  $SD = 19.51$ ) or magazines ( $M = 7.32$  min;  $SD = 16.97$ ). Looking at specific tools, participants used Facebook ( $M = 88.20$  min;  $SD = 101.60$ ) and text messaging the most ( $M = 126.70$  min;  $SD = 218.74$ ), followed by Twitter ( $M = 63.44$  min;  $SD = 132.20$ ) and e-mail ( $M = 56.82$  min;  $SD = 96.80$ ).

The majority indicated they were registered to vote ( $n = 130$ ; 72.6%), and the remainder of citizens were not registered to vote ( $n = 30$ ; 16.8%), not eligible to vote in the United States ( $n = 17$ ; 9.5%), or failed to provide voter registration information ( $n = 21$ ; 11.7%). Not surprisingly, this group indicated that they, indeed, intended to vote ( $n = 139$ ; 77.7%). Nearly a third of participants indicated they did not affiliate with a political party ( $n = 54$ ; 30.2%), but party affiliation was nearly equally mixed Democrat ( $n = 53$ ; 29.6%) and Republican ( $n = 51$ ; 28.5%). There were 20 self-described Independents (11.2%). The strength of ideology was relatively neutral ( $M = 2.93$ ;  $SD = 1.19$ ). When asked to gauge the main candidates in the election on the *feeling thermometer*, participants rated incumbent and Democratic candidate Obama the most warmly ( $M = 54.72$ ;  $SD = 32.42$ ), though neutrally. Republican candidates Mitt Romney ( $M = 35.78$ ;  $SD = 27.94$ ) and Newt Gingrich ( $M = 29.40$ ;  $SD = 24.28$ ) were rated coolly. See Table 3 for political party affiliation, when provided.

### Relationships Based on Engagement

Investigating whether the level of engagement one had with the organization via social media might impact the participant's relationship with the political organization, an ANOVA was

TABLE 3  
Self-Identified Political Ideology Within Manipulation Cell

	<i>Control cell</i>	<i>Noninteractive (follow) cell</i>	<i>Interactive (tweet) cell</i>
Democrat	15	17	21
Republican	4	4	12
Independent	12	8	31

*Note.* Respondents, if desired, indicated political party affiliation. Not all respondents provided data.

conducted to examine the change in relationship (dependent variable, factor scores) based on experimental condition (independent variable, 3 levels). Among the relationship factors, there was one statistically significant difference. The *symmetrical communication* factor displayed main effects,  $F(2, 158) = 6.25, p \leq .005$ . A Tukey's post-hoc analysis revealed that the interactive (tweet) cell displayed a greater sense for two-way communication than the control group ( $M$  difference = .64,  $p \leq .005$ ). As such, RQ1 is addressed in that involved engagement (tweeting at an organization), even for a time period as short as 2 weeks, indeed increases the sense there is a real conversational exchange.

### Internal Political Disposition as Predictor of Relationship

The next research question asked whether internal political disposition variables, such as political cynicism and political information efficacy, play a role in predicting the political organization–public relationship. Using the relationship factor scores as the dependent variable in a series of linear regression tests, results revealed the impact of one's political nature on relationship maintenance with a Super PAC based on engagement. Only the engagement experimental conditions (follow and tweet cells) were analyzed.

For the noninteractive (follow) cell, *commitment* could be predicted with a model that explained 21.6% of the concept (adjusted  $r^2 = .15$ ). In this case, *commitment* was predicted by low political information efficacy ( $\beta = -.357, p \leq .05$ ) and low cynicism ( $\beta = -.371, p \leq .05$ ). The *symmetrical communication* factor was explained by a model with an  $r$ -square of 19.1% (adjusted  $r^2 = 12.6, p \leq .05$ ), where high cynicism ( $\beta = .385, p \leq .05$ ) acted as the only significant predictor for *Commitment* among those in the follow engagement cell.

Moving to greater levels of engagement focusing on the interactive (tweet) experimental cell, the *positivity & accountability* factor was explained by a model with an  $r$  square of 11.8% (adjusted  $r^2 = .08, p \leq .05$ ), with low cynicism ( $\beta = -.302, p \leq .01$ ) and strength of ideology ( $\beta = .230, p \leq .05$ ) being main predictors.

In answering RQ2, results indicate internal political disposition can help predict organization–public relationship. These variables played a greater role in the lesser engaged experimental conditions.

## DISCUSSION

Ferguson (1984) was the first of many scholars (e.g., Brunig & Ledingham, 1999; J. E. Grunig, 1993; Ledingham, 2003) to establish that one of the most important objectives for an organization

is to maintain good relationship with its publics. For an organization, establishing and maintaining this positive connection is crucial to portraying a positive image and being receptive to what its publics have to say. These principles are arguably more important to political candidates and political organizations because maintaining an open line of communication with supporters is paramount to their overall success, especially during electoral cycles. Considering the importance of relationship maintenance, this study investigated how noncandidate political organizations (Super PACs) used Twitter to maintain relationships with its publics.

This study focused on relationship as a destination and employed the relational maintenance strategies as dependent variables. Certainly in day-to-day public relations practice, the construct of relationship is not the end state, rather it is one of the many inputs a practitioner attempts to foster to reach a larger goal, typically of a prescribed behavior or attitude. Yet, to understand how to manipulate that input, we must isolate it and study what impact specific actions (i.e., in this case Twitter behavior) have on that construct. By taking the approach here to investigate the antecedents to each of the relational maintenance strategies, we are arming practitioners with a stronger understanding of how to create an environment that nurtures relationship. In applying the findings here in their practice of public relations, professionals will find relationship one of many building blocks that direct their publics to that desired end state.

Congruent with previous research (e.g., Taylor & Kent, 1998), one's level of engagement with an organization positively affected the relationship with the organization. Our findings reveal that active engagement (i.e., tweeting at an organization), even for a short period of time, increased the perception of a true two-way communication compared to simply having a Twitter account (control group). Findings support Pearson and O'Connell's (2012) assertion establishing the use of digital and social media as a necessity for political candidates and organizations. In addition, the study expands on Solop's (2009) examination of Twitter in political campaigns beyond providing simply informational and image-related uses.

This information suggests that organizations need not fear social media engagement as a key tactic in their arsenal of relationship management tools. Engagement facilitated relationship. With effects being noticed even after 2 weeks, it stands to reason that prolonged engagement would only deepen that relationship. This becomes extremely important to political organizations, whose active campaign cycle tends to revolve around the election cycle (every 2 to 4 years). Considering that first-time voters have a tenuous, at best, relationship with political parties (Sweetser, 2013), political organizations need to find ways to connect with their publics or risk irrelevance. Recent scholarship does suggest that the two-party system in the United States, as people know it, could be in danger as this next upcoming generation of voters fails to connect and exhibit a strong relationship with their chosen political party (Sweetser, 2013).

In looking at antecedents to relationship, it appears that traditional variables such as information and perceptions about the political system do play a role. Specifically, cynicism here appeared to be a key variable. In some cases, low cynicism was found in predicting relationship (*commitment* for the noninteractive cell, *positivity & accountability* for the interactive cell), whereas high cynicism predicted strength of *symmetrical communication* relationship for the noninteractive cell. Intuitively, it is logical that those who are less suspicious of politicians would be more receptive to relationship in feeling a *commitment* from the Super PAC and that they were communicating with *positivity & accountability*.

In all, the antecedents played a greater role in the lesser engaged conditions, which signals that organizations have an opportunity to overcome internal predispositions to resist

relationship-building within their publics if organizations do become more engaging. To put it another way, without real engagement with organizations publics will allow their predisposed political beliefs to direct the relationship. Yet, when there is interaction, then organizations have an opportunity to overcome that and begin building a relationship. Connecting this again to the low levels of relationship that first-time voters reported with their chosen political parties (Sweetser, 2013), it is evident that political organizations must continue to push for deeper connections for their own organizations to avoid becoming insignificant.

With the increased use of the Internet and social media sites in particular, organizations have an opportunity to truly connect with their publics. As the results of this research show, the small act of merely tweeting at an organization increased people's perceptions of having a true relationship with that group. Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) found this concept in their study of nonprofits' use of Twitter, and this experiment adds to the understanding of how citizens perceive and value engagement with a political organization. This finding is important because it shows that for an organization to establish a relationship with its publics, a simple reply or retweet is enough—in the beginning, at least—for people to feel connected. Even so, many organizations are criticized for being one-way communicators in social spaces. Reasons for this approach range from lack of proper staffing to fear of opening the organization up in such a way. The data here, which were collected in a heated election and revolved around incendiary conversations, clearly show that winning hearts and minds can start with 140 characters or less. Certainly, interaction with every individual user is not feasible for an organization, but the benefits of engagement do hold promise.

Jansen et al. (2009) established the concept that organizations all have different priorities in their use of Twitter. The findings here provide an expansion in the research related to how users perceive an organization's use of Twitter. By connecting these threads, we begin to see a more holistic picture of how Twitter and other digital tools can be used more effectively in the future.

### Limitations and Future Research

As with all studies, there are some limitations. Relationship, on its own, is not going to create votes on Election Day and may not be enough to inspire constituents to very active political support such as volunteering. Indeed, what it takes to create a vote, donation, or volunteer is a complex combination of several variables and this study simply looked at how one activity (interaction) might impact one component (relationship) of that matrix. The results here should, then, be interpreted cautiously as one slice of the overall equation, not as a final answer to the question.

First, this study uses an undergraduate student sample. One can argue that undergraduate students are not a representative sample of the general population. Although this argument is justifiable, in this study, this sample is likely the most appropriate. User data on social media supports the preposition that young people are still the most frequent users of social media sites. Nonetheless, future studies should encompass a broader sample to rule out any type of sample bias. Second, participants were asked to follow a specific Super PAC Twitter account. Because participants were asked to follow, as opposed to voluntarily choosing to do so, this, in itself, might have influenced the results. Beyond the fact that the user may not even be interested in following organizations on Twitter, the participant may have been at ideological odds with

the Super PAC used as a stimulus. Future studies should provide a broader range of accounts from which participants can choose or review their own organically-developed digital political OPR, and control for ideology. Third, the unequal cell sizes in the manipulation cells do create a limitation. Good practice for experimental design is to ensure equal, or close-to-equal, manipulation cell size. The unequal cell size here was an artifact of this data being collected across different states and three campuses, as well as a greater retention rate than expected among participants.

One may ask what value there is in studying the impact of interaction in such an artificial scenario where participants were told not only who to follow on Twitter, but how to interact (or not interact) with that organization. Does not data based on such a forced follow provide any real-world insight? We argue that, indeed, it does, although it is limiting. Although the study featured levels of interaction, the very basis for all groups was exposure. As social media tools evolve they facilitate viral content to a greater extent, in addition to advertising models. It is quite reasonable that a social media user would come across content from an organization that user does not follow—be it through a sponsored post or an artifact of a friend somehow sharing the content. As such, studies like this help one understand what exposure (in this case the non-interactive follow cell) might do with regard to relationship. Repeated exposure—either through a friend’s constant sharing or a very active sponsored content campaign—was simulated through the noninteractive follow cell. Although not without limitation, this data can assist scholars in understanding the relationship impact of that repeated exposure. From this information, campaigns can make very tactical decisions such as whether to encourage their users to share content from their own accounts or even make sponsored content advertising buys.

## Conclusion

As research continues to investigate relationship as a dependent variable, and greater knowledge in impacting relationship is gained, more studies will be able to look at relationship as a covariate in crafting the equation for what it takes to make someone vote a certain way, actively support an organization through volunteering, or inspiring donation. Relationship is not proposed to be the sole destination in this journey toward attitude and behavior, but it may be one of the more important constructs. Furthermore, relationship is certainly a more malleable construct in that practitioners have an opportunity to shape and nurture it with their publics more so than other factors. Knowing that engagement through a social media tool can increase a sense of relationship is a key knowledge point for practitioners who may find their campaigns lacking in that area.

From a practitioner’s standpoint, the findings that such simple acts of engagement improve relationship would be met with positive response in that the return on investment of organizational time versus positive outcome is encouraging. That said, one should be warned of a too optimistic view of these findings. In many of the cases here, participants had newly forged relationships with the organization for the purpose of this study. Just as in an interpersonal relationship, that new relationship doesn’t require the amount of maintenance it later needs to continue to prosper. In other words, over time it may not be enough to retweet something from the organization’s publics. This is likely one piece of what should be a much larger relationship maintenance strategy. Organizations may need to invest more time in the symmetrical communication model



and reach higher levels of two-way communication. Here, though, it is clear that in forming a new relationship very simple overtures of symmetrical communication are effective but future research should examine what is needed to maintain that relationship and prevent degradation.

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