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A Losing Strategy: The Impact of Nondisclosure in Social Media on Relationships

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Using a posttest-only experimental design with control ($N=409$), this study investigated the role of nondisclosure and its impact on perceived relational maintenance strategies in the context of social media campaigns through the relational theory of public relations. As one of the first studies investigating what an organization can do to damage—rather than build—a relationship with their publics, this experiment manipulated a single ethical construct to determine whether that unethical behavior degraded the organization–public relationship. Results indicate that unethical behavior (i.e., lack of disclosure) indeed damaged the organization–public relationship within several relational maintenance strategies: *communicated relational commitment*, *responsiveness/customer service*, *positivity/optimism*, and *responsiveness to criticism*. Implications to both the practice and the further development of relationship management theory are discussed.

Relationships with one's publics are so vital that the term *relationship* appears in nearly every definition of public relations (Bruning, 2000). Even the moniker for the field, itself, positions the industry as one that cares

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about its *relation(ship)* with the *public*. As such, much scholarly work has been done to investigate relationships in terms of describing them, touting the importance of them, and investigating the conditions that might positively impact them.

Since Ferguson (1984) shined a light on this then-emerging area of scholarship in public relations, researchers have added to their study of relationship theory particular media through which relationships with one's publics can be better fostered. Wright (1998, 2001) asserted that the Internet held much promise for facilitating the development of relationship between organization and public. Since then, a line of online public relations research has moved relationship theory beyond examining Web site content of organizations and active publics to experiments investigating conditions that impact relationships (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007).

Such work has empirically examined several concepts that impact and predict relational changes between an organization and its publics. With social media, an increasingly popular means through which companies can communicate in online communities (and do so more in a human voice, as opposed to an organizational voice), this study will begin work looking not at what builds relationship via social media, but rather what can damage that relationship. This work is needed now, as the field finds itself facing more case studies of what not to do with little empirical data to support the anecdotes. The anonymity afforded online and overwhelming response to participatory products (e.g., social media tools that allow the user to participate like blogs or social networks) have arguably exposed more instances than previously found before digital communication where companies have acted unethically. Specifically, companies can more easily create content and post it online, disguised as user-created content, as opposed to corporate productions. It is, perhaps, easier for consumers and watchdogs to track companies now and reveal any unethical communication behavior that may occur. For example, one of the more well-known cases was the fake blog "Wal-Marting Across America," which did not disclose that Wal-Mart itself was behind the seemingly grassroots blog that featured upbeat accounts of Jim and Laura's trip in an RV driving across America from Wal-Mart to Wal-Mart, highlighting the social good of the company (Martin & Smith, 2008).

Instances such as these go against ethical codes adopted by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA, 2000), as well as more online-specific organizations such as the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA, 2009) and the Social Media Business Council (SMBC, 2009). As a response to the changing media landscape and the increasing need to establish a common set of ethical guidelines for online communicators, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC, 2009) updated its advertising and endorsements guidelines in the United States, the first update in almost 30

years. The updated guidelines specifically addressed social media communication and outlined ethical behavior for companies who communicate online. The FTC Act changes did little more than make ethical practices in social media law, but the signal that a federal organization is now monitoring and fining organizations sends a strong message to corporations managing campaigns in social spaces.

Given that other scholars have heralded the Internet, and more recently social media, as containing limitless opportunities to really connect with one's publics and the humanizing aspect of *friending* a company through social networks (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Sweetser, Avery, Lariscy, & Howes, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2009), there are now fewer differences than before in organization–public relationships, compared to interpersonal relationships. As such, the next logical questions in relationship management theory should examine whether the same conditions that damage interpersonal relationships can damage organization–public relationships.

The purpose of this study is to extend the empirical and predictive work on relational theory in public relations. Specifically, this study illuminates the effects of unethical practice on relationship through a posttest-only experimental design (with control) that manipulates whether an organization lied or told the truth during a targeted campaign. Here, unethical behavior will be manifest as a violation of *disclosure*, based on the recent changes to the FTC Act from the FTC and the codes of ethics from PRSA, WOMMA, and the SMBC. In the face of recent government regulation in this area, this study will also shed light on the impact unethical campaigns have on publics. Set in the context of social media and making the most of virality, this study provides guidelines on how far users of social media will allow organizations to push the boundaries and take risks in this emergent media in the name of entertainment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rooted in relationship theory literature, this study examines the impact of an ethical practice of organizations as a key component to their relationship with their target publics. By manipulating ethical practice and presenting an organization as either having lied or told the truth about a viral video social media campaign, this study provides insight into the impact of perceived credibility and ethical standing on the organization–public relationship.

Relational Theory of Public Relations

A relationship is a key component to effective public relations (Grunig, 1993a; Ledingham, 2003). Bruning (2000) asserted that like interpersonal

relationships, organization–public relationships should satisfy the needs of the public and their expectations. Since Ferguson (1984) suggested public relations scholars study relationships between organizations and their publics, theoretical work in this area has increased exponentially, placing relationship theory as the second-most researched area in public relations scholarship (Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzurua, & Jones, 2003).

In their seminal book focused on strategic communication, Center and Jackson (1995) observed, “The proper term for the desired outcomes of public relations practice is *public relationships*. An organization with effective public relations will attain positive public relationships” (p. 2, emphasis added). Like human-to-human interpersonal relationships, relationships between an organization and its publics must be fostered over time. Many similarities between interpersonal relationships and organization–public relationships have been drawn by public relations scholars (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Bruning, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999), including the need for real interaction (Kelleher, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 1998), the impact of communication on credibility (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007), and openness (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). As such, is it posited that just as fractures on these concepts might injure an interpersonal relationship, so, too, would fractures damage an organization–public relationship.

Relationship maintenance strategies, developed by Stafford and Canary in a series of articles (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991), include five factored constructs: *positivity* (cheerful, uncritical communication), *openness* (direct communication regarding the nature of the relationship or the desire to establish one), *assurances* (communication regarding the want to continue the relationship), *social networks* (referring to affiliations and relations), and *task sharing* (performing one’s responsibilities).

To evaluate these relationship maintenance strategies, public relations research has undertaken substantial work in relational outcomes. As such, public relations is able to quantify the benefits that come as a result of relationships. Work in this area assists in providing a concrete picture of the effectiveness of relationship maintenance strategies through measured relational outcomes such as mutual satisfaction, trust, commitment, and control mutuality among others (Ferguson, 1984; Kelleher & Miller, 2006).

Looking at these relational outcomes, Bruning and Ledingham (1999) suggested that relationship should be considered when developing customer satisfaction initiatives, indicating a tie between the concepts. Bruning (2000) found that bank customers who self-identified as *being in a relationship* with their bank were more likely to continue that relationship, signifying brand loyalty. A later study confirmed those findings about the power of brand loyalty as it relates to relationship in another industry (Bruning & Ralston,

2000). Ledingham (2001) suggested that relationships between city government and residents should focus on mutuality based on the expectation that the city will support residents. Ki and Hon (2007) found that perceptions of satisfaction and control mutuality (defined as “the degree to which parties agree on issues of power and influence,” according to Kelleher & Miller, 2006) were the best predictors of a positive attitude, and this positive attitude can lead to supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization. This positive relationship is not always the result of what the organization does for the customer, but also relationships with other (non-customer) publics. Additionally, researchers have found positive linkages based on social responsibility. Hall (2006) found that awareness of an organization’s philanthropic and community service activities correspond with a stronger relationship.

As Gallicano (2009) pointed out, the majority of public relations scholarship focuses on cultivation strategies and outcomes with regard to relationship theory. Few studies investigate concepts that damage relationships, as this study aims to do. An exception is a content analysis looking at what organizations were doing to respond to phishing (Baker, Baker, & Tedesco, 2007). Baker et al. (2007) defined phishing as “the fraudulent and increasingly authentic looking e-mail attempts aimed to lure unsuspecting recipients into sharing information” (p. 327), noting that phishing attempts can negatively impact relationships and trust in an organization among publics.

Ethics and Credibility

Relationships have many important variables as a foundation and measurable relational outcomes. Bowen (2004) suggested that ethical actions by public relations practitioners within an organization lead to positive relationship building with one’s publics. In public relations, communication that conveys constructs such as trust, openness to dialog, and credibility help lay the groundwork for relationships. Hon and Grunig (1999) noted that these constructs represent an approach an organization would take to maintain a relationship. A key concept in this process is disclosure as a part of openness (Hon & Grunig, 1999). This cross-over from relationship management and relational outcomes to ethics signals a natural connection between the two concepts that should be investigated.

The beginning of the PRSA (2000) code of ethics pledge states that that a practitioner promises “To conduct myself professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, and responsibility to the public.” Although there is a broad body of literature on ethics in public relations, this simple pledge brings to the forefront the idea of truth, the importance of accuracy, fairness,

and one's responsibility to the public. Hon and Grunig (1999) would argue that adherence to such a code would allow for a higher quality and two-way symmetrical relationship.

As earlier discussed, organization–public relations operate in similar, albeit larger, fashion as interpersonal relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Ferguson, 1984; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Fractures in the building blocks of a relationship can cause damage to that relationship. For example, if one friend tells a lie to another, that infraction can damage credibility and degrade the relationship. It may not end the relationship entirely, but it has the potential to damage it. Similarly, it is posited here that if an organization acts unethically (i.e., tells a lie or fails to disclose, as the case is here), it has the potential to damage the organization–public relationship.

Grunig (1993b) discussed disclosure as it related to ethics in detail through a series of case studies examining unethical practice in international public relations. In some cases, lack of full disclosure, although questionable and categorized by him as being unethical, still fell within the guidelines of what was acceptable according to the PRSA code of ethics (Grunig, 1993b). He examined dubious disclosure practices and operationalized missteps as: failure to disclose the source of print and video materials as public relations products and failure to disclose organizations supporting front organizations, or the name of one's real client (Grunig, 1993b).

Disclosure-type problems remained an issue in the practice prior to a rewriting of the PRSA code of ethics in 2000 (Fitzpatrick, 2002). A focus group of practitioners identified disclosure as a key concern, naming several issues such as front organizations, paying for editorial coverage, and conflicts of interest (Ethics Resource Center, 1999). As a result, a revised code addressed disclosure of information directly (Fitzpatrick, 2002). In addition to the practitioners, their publics are also asking for revisions in ethical practice in the wake of corporate scandals like Enron (Bernardi & LaCross, 2005). That is, stakeholders have responded through greater demands for corporate transparency (Bernardi & LaCross, 2005).

Looking more generally at the public relations ethics research, Fitzpatrick and Gauthier (2001) suggested that barriers to ethical practice include: lack of clarity in the parameters of public relations research, failure to completely extricate the field from journalism and the difficult balance of fairness in advocacy, minimal standards for ethical practice with regard to professionalization of the industry (no licensing) and association-created codes of conduct that are not theoretical based, as well as incongruent values of a practitioner and the organization for which he or she works.

Previous relational outcomes literature looks at concepts of trust and commitment, among other constructs (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher,

2009). Adding to this literature, as shown in this study, is the concept of credibility. Conceptually, credibility and trust are related to the point that they may not be mutually exclusive. For example, Hon and Grunig's trust variable deals more with an organization doing the right thing from a business aspect (walking the talk or keeping its word), as opposed to acting ethically (being trustworthy, factual, or ethical; disclosing information, etc.). Therefore, this study focuses on the relational outcomes most related to ethical behavior.

In dealing with online communication, the credibility concept has been a key variable for researchers. From comparing the credibility of one medium to another (Kiousis, 2001) to examinations of the credibility of social media content (Banning & Sweetser, 2007; Johnson & Kaye, 2004), mass communication studies have tackled this concept. In public relations literature, Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) conducted an experiment testing relationship with an organization during a crisis and found an inverse relationship between the perception of an organization being in crisis and credibility. In their posttest-only experimental design, blog source was manipulated and participants were exposed to either an organizational blog or a blog written by someone outside the organization (amateur blog covering the industry). Participants who rated credibility of the blog that they read low seemed to rate the perception that the organization was in crisis higher. This indicates the importance of maintaining credibility, especially with regard to relationship management, as it is a necessary tool in rebounding from a crisis.

Based on the aforementioned research into credibility, the following research questions are submitted:

- RQ1: To what extent are relationship strategies correlated with the relational outcome of credibility?
- RQ2: To what extent is there a difference in the relational outcome of credibility based on ethical public relations practice?

Web-Based Communication in Public Relations

Communication technologies have developed over time and provided practitioners with an edge and greater opportunities in communicating their messages. Even so, Lordon (1999) contended that "technology remains what it has always been, a tool used by PR professionals to help them do their jobs" (p. 15). Although public relations practitioners were slow to adopt Internet-based tools and the use of the World Wide Web in the practice lagged behind the general population (Porter, Sallot, Cameron, & Shamp, 2001), the industry quickly caught up when it realized the power of the

medium (Sweetser, Porter, Chung, & Kim, 2008). Indeed, White and Raman (1999) posited that “the World Wide Web can be considered the first public relations mass medium in that it allows managed communication to flow directly between organizations and mass audiences without the gatekeeping function of other mass media” (p. 406).

In an early assessment of public relations practitioners’ use of the Web, Hill and White (2000) found that practitioners believe that a Web site symbolizes an organization’s competitiveness, enhances an organization’s image, and increases the practitioner’s personal sense of professionalism. Yet, practitioners relied little on research and planning and more on intuition or trial and error when developing a Web presence in the late 1990s (White & Raman, 1999). As such, Hallahan (2001) suggested and provided guidelines for Web site usability research as an attempt to introduce the standard campaign research and evaluation components into building an organization’s Web site.

Such organizationally published Web site content is important for several reasons. First, journalists have reported using these public relations tools as an information subsidy (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003). That is, journalists turn to Web site content for background research materials. This use has held true for blogs, as more than half of journalists report using blogs for story ideas and as a way to identify sources (Euro RSCG Magnet, 2005; Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009a). Second, Web content is important in that it provides a way for practitioners to directly engage their publics (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; White & Raman, 1999). To this point, a 3-year study found that, in general, organizations use social media to reach out to external publics (Wright & Hinson, 2008).

Research along this vein has shown the ripe opportunities for relationship building through the Web (Sweetser et al., 2009). A series of online tools that encourage interaction are popularly referred to as social media, which emphasizes the social aspect of the medium. Certainly, not all tools are equal with regard to interactivity potential, appropriateness, or adoption, but, for parsimony, social media are discussed here as the sum of the tools and their collective opportunities for enhancement (Eyrich et al., 2008; Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, & Howes, 2009b; Sweetser et al., 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Wright & Hinson, 2009). Given that public relations places high value on two-way communication and aims for this dialogic approach (Kent & Taylor, 1998), it seems appropriate that practitioners and academics would embrace investigations on how the Internet can be used for organization–public relationships. A recent survey of public relations departments at Fortune 500 and Fortune 1000 companies noted that the most frequently stated

use for social tools dealt with relationship building (Sweetser et al., 2009). Another study found that a majority (84%) of public relations practitioners believe social media is a low-cost way to develop relationships with strategic publics (Wright & Hinson, 2009).

Several studies provide empirical evidence to the fact that publics positively respond to the human voice organizations can communicate through social media tools (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Yang & Lim, 2009). For example, a series of experiments testing relational maintenance strategies in various contexts found social media a more advantageous avenue for building organization–public relationships (Kelleher & Miller, 2006) and as an effective crisis diffusion tool by an organization (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Jo and Kim (2003) conducted an experiment that revealed that interactivity had significant effects on relationship building. More specifically, Jo and Kim found reputation increased among groups exposed to high interactivity and multimedia Web sites for an organization. Additionally, that study found that blogger credibility played a positive role in relational trust. Yang and Lim (2009) in studying blog-mediated public relations found that “dialogical self in blog posts enhanced interactivity, which, in turn, led to an increase in relational trust” (p. 341). The sum of these experiments suggests communicating in a human voice and making the most of multimedia can positively impact the organization–public relationship.

Like good interpersonal relationships, organization–public relationships with quality are two-way. As Bruning and Ralston (2001) pointed out, “key public members are not passive recipients of communication” (p. 427), but rather active and sometimes equal participants in communication thanks to the interactivity afforded through new communication technologies (Gronstedt, 1997; Kelleher, 2009). In this regard, the power of virality and word-of-mouth becomes an important concept that impacts public relations efforts just as much as marketing efforts. The majority of social media have this concept embedded into the very fabric of the tools, which make it easy to repost and share content across the Web. This potential for virality adds an extra layer of relationship, as now it isn’t simply an organization–customer relationship but that customer can share organizational content with a noncustomer friend not originally targeted by a campaign.

Based on the aforementioned social media public relations literature, along with Martin and Smith (2008)’s assessment of the potential damage that lack of proper disclosure can do, the following hypothesis is posited:

- H1: An organization’s failure to disclose in a social media environment will damage perceptions of relationship strategies.

METHOD

Using a posttest-only experimental design with control group ($N = 409$), this study manipulated an ethical approach taken by an organization during a social media viral campaign. A review of the most widely used industry policies on ethics (PRSA, WOMMA, SMBC, FTC) determined that *disclosure* was among several common threads and an area specifically defined in ethical policies. Although other commonalities were observed, the single construct of disclosure was selected for manipulation in this experiment for the ability to control the variable, the realistic nature of manipulations, and parsimony. Fitzpatrick (2002) and Grunig (1993b) described disclosure as one of the main issues with regard to public relations ethics. Furthermore, the majority of case studies existing today about unethical behavior online deal with lack of disclosure (Martin & Smith, 2008). According to the PRSA (2000) code of ethics, the intent of disclosure is "To build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision making." Guidelines associated with this code provision include being "honest and accurate in all communications" as well as revealing "the sponsors for causes and interests represented" (PRSA, 2000). The online specific ethical guidelines from WOMMA, SMBC, and FTC all discuss the concept of disclosure and implore organizations to be transparent in their communication.

Procedure

The experiment was conducted in August 2009, and featured a video used in an actual social media campaign from BMW in 2008. In the "Rampenfest" campaign, BMW created a series of online videos posted on the popular video site YouTube in early 2008. The plot of the video series revolved around a town in Bavaria that was attempting to build a ramp from which the town would launch a BMW across the Atlantic. The video series was done documentary style, which is often called *mockumentary* in the case of a fake documentary. The video series was presented online with no mention of support or production backing from BMW. The videos were posted on what appeared to be the personal YouTube account of the director. CNN noted that the videos were "on the Internet for months before the car company admitted (the videos were) theirs" (Cho, 2008). Given that the initial presentation of the videos online had no reference to being produced by BMW and were presented as a single (non-BMW affiliated) person's uploads on the video site, this case would be considered similar to Wal-Mart blog earlier discussed (Martin & Smith, 2008).

In an interview with CNN (Cho, 2008), a BMW vice president described the campaign as a promotion for a yet-to-be-released car. CNN called the video a part of a “guerilla marketing campaign where people watching the videos may not know that someone is trying to sell them something” (Cho, 2008). BMW moved this campaign beyond mere marketing, however, in the creation of several social sites meant to foster relationships with their publics (all revolving around this campaign). That said, the only way the social sites would have been meaningful was if the publics had been exposed to the online videos. As such, this study used the viral video as a springboard for relationship, just as the actual BMW campaign had done.

For the purposes of this research, a single characteristic in BMW’s ethical approach was manipulated. *Disclosure* was the ethical concept selected for manipulation based on its mention in the major ethical codes reviewed (PRSA, WOMMA, SMBC, FTC) and its importance in existing research (Fitzpatrick, 2002; Grunig, 1993b; Martin & Smith, 2008). Disclosure was selected as the single manipulation for parsimony, as well as the ease of control and realistic nature of the manipulation.

The stimulus used humor appeals and mentioned the organization’s product frequently (BMW cars), although it wasn’t a typical commercial. Because of the mockumentary format, the video was not clear as to whether it was real or fiction. The video was an edited version (approximately 8 min long) of a 30-min long investigation (mockumentary) and posted on YouTube in segments on the fake documentary director’s personal YouTube page. This edited stimulus was true to the posting format of the videos during the campaign, as BMW posted several pieces of the story line prior to the providing the entire 30-min mockumentary. Both manipulation cells were exposed to the same version of the online viral video produced by BMW. The experimental cells were manipulated as follows:

- *lie* ($n = 159$): Participants were told the viral video they watched was created by the company, but the company denied producing it; it was said an investigation later revealed the company had created it and lied—no disclosure;
- *truth* ($n = 156$): Participants were told the viral video was created by the company, who admitted it was a produced viral video from the beginning—proper disclosure; and
- *control* ($n = 94$): Participants did not watch video and completed posttest questionnaire to provide baseline account of relationship with and perceived credibility of company (posttest only).

Sample

Knowing that social media, and viral video in particular, are widely used by young people (Pew Internet & American Life, 2009), this study recruited college-aged participants who use social media ($N = 409$). As such, a convenience sample of college undergraduates was recruited to participate in this experiment (M age = 20.45 years old, range = 18–37 years old). According to a Pew Internet and American Life (2009) report on online video conducted months before the current data was collected, use of online video among Americans between 18–29 years old is near universal at 89%, with 36% of them doing so daily. The report also stated that watching videos online is more prevalent than use of social network sites at this time (Pew Internet & American Life, 2009). Although 2009 data were not available, the previous report on online video reported more than half of Americans online (57%) shared online video with a friend and a full 75% watched a video sent from a friend (Pew Internet & American Life, 2007), suggesting virality. The report also stated that the number of people visiting online videos sites daily doubled from previous years (Pew Internet & American Life, 2009). People are also watching longer video segments today than in previous years, to include entire television show episodes and movies (Pew Internet & American Life, 2009).

The participants were all social media users, who self-reported using the Internet an average of 2.15 hr ($SD = 1.25$) per day. That use is focused on online video, social networks, and text messaging.

Although some may argue that this age range is not a typical demographic for a luxury product featured in the stimulus, a BMW vice president told CNN that the company was not interested in demographics but, rather, focused on psychographics and noted the target for this particular campaign “could be an 18 year old or an 80 year old, but they share the same mindset” (Cho, 2008). The company instead focuses their publics’ activation efforts on creating messages for most appropriate for those with whom they hope to reach from a psychological perspective, as opposed to a typical demographics approach. As such, although one may not feel that the sample used in this study is the typical BMW target market, the statements made by BMW in that they were not attempting to reach their standard target market justify the use of this sample.

Instrument

All groups completed the posttest questionnaire, which included all the same items, regardless of manipulation cell assignment. The independent variable manipulated in this study was the ethical construct of disclosure;

the dependent variables were relational maintenance strategies and credibility as a relational outcome.

Relationship with the organization was measured using a relational maintenance strategies scale previously adapted for social media (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Measuring 25 items on a five-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. See Table 1 for a listing of the specific items.

Given the focus on ethical public relations here, this study selected credibility items used in other studies (Johnson & Kaye, 2004; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Sweetser et al., 2008) over less specific variables, such as trust alone as a relational outcome. A 12-item scale was used to determine the credibility of the organization on a five-point Likert scale (with 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Items on the scale included: trustworthy, only concerned about profits (reverse coded), factual, interested in the community's well-being, fair, in-depth information communicated, believable, ethical, acts responsibly to the public, discloses information to the public, safeguards private and personal information, avoids conflict of interest. Note that the independent variable manipulated via the stimulus was the *organizational communication behavior* and that the ethics in the dependent variable in this instance was the *public perception* of an organization's ethics.

Data Analysis

As was done with previous uses of the relational maintenance strategy items (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007), the scale was factor analyzed using principal axis factoring (varimax rotation). The factor analysis returned seven unique constructs, which explained 66.19% of the variance. (Note that one item from the initial relational commitment scale did not load so the item was removed.) The seven factor constructs varied slightly from earlier work (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007), which is possibly due to the fact that the previous experiments used a blog as a stimulus as opposed to multimedia. The slight differences in this factor breakdown from previous tests of this scale produced two additional constructs, which further broke out the concepts of response to criticism and dialogue. Even so, the groupings here occurred so similarly to previous studies that, when appropriate, the existing factor name established in previous studies was used to describe the construct. The relationship maintenance strategy factors, also called

TABLE 1
Relational Maintenance Strategies Factor Loadings

<i>Factors</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Factor loadings</i>							
			<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	
Task sharing (Factor 1) alpha = .814										
Directly addresses organizational responsibilities	2.76	.92	.73							
Performs organizational responsibilities	3.05	.91	.66							
Emphasizes relationship quality	2.79	1.00	.66							
Directly discusses the organization's nature	2.68	1.01	.65							
Does not shirk duties	2.88	.80	.44							
Communicated relational commitment (Factor 2) alpha = .817										
Communicates desire to build relationship w/me or others	3.35	.93		.77						
Committed to maintaining relationship	3.34	.85		.63						
Stresses commitment	3.10	.95		.63						
Implies relationship has future/long term commitment	3.14	.94		.50						
Treats me/others as human	3.50	.88		.30						
Conversational human voice (Factor 3) alpha = .732										
Tries to be interesting	4.28	.74			.77					
Uses sense of humor	4.17	1.09			.63					
Makes communication enjoyable	4.11	.86			.60					
Communicates in a human voice	3.72	.97			.47					
Responsiveness/customer service (Factor 4) alpha = .821										
Answers phone calls from me/others	3.01	.99				.87				
Answers e-mail from me/others	3.09	.92				.76				
Willing to address complaints rather than taking negative reactions	3.11	.89				.52				
Dialogue (Factor 5) alpha = .762										
Open to dialogue	3.44	.92					.78			
Invites people into conversation	3.48	.99					.78			
Uses conversational style	3.42	1.00					.37			
Positivity/optimism (Factor 6) alpha = .820										
Uses positive, optimistic tone	3.85	.92						.75		
Presents themselves as cheerful and optimistic regarding the future	3.80	.91						.74		
Responsive to criticism (Factor 7) alpha = .568										
Would admit a mistake	2.89	.95							.60	
Provides prompt feedback addressing criticism (uncritical)	2.82	.82							.55	
Percent of variance explained			26.51	15.02	6.65	5.37	4.76	4.40	4.17	

TABLE 2
Credibility Index Item Mean Scores

<i>Credibility item</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Trustworthy	3.21	.90
Only concerned about profits (reverse coded)	2.87	.93
Factual	2.71	.96
Interested in community's well being	2.97	.95
Fair	3.09	.80
In-depth in information communicated	2.66	.95
Believable	2.79	1.05
Ethical	2.93	.89
Acts responsibility to public	3.00	.92
Discloses information public should know	2.67	.91
Safeguards private and personal information	3.08	.86
Avoids conflicts of interest	2.93	.91

Note. Items asked on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*. Alpha for entire index is .887.

relationship strategies, were *task sharing* (alpha = .81), *communicated relational commitment* (alpha = .81), *conversational human voice* (alpha = .73), *responsiveness/customer service* (alpha = .82), *dialogue* (alpha = .76), *positivity/optimism* (alpha = .82), and *responsiveness to criticism* (alpha = .56). The factor loading scores and listing of variables within each construct are listed in Table 1.

The credibility items were used as a measure to further understand the impact of ethical communication behavior. The credibility items were initially factor analyzed, however the resulting solution did not meet the commonly accepted threshold of explaining at least 60% of the variance. According to Child (2006, p. 63) and Netemeyer, Bearden, and Sharma (2003, p. 124), explaining around 60% of the variance is common in the behavioral sciences. As such, the credibility items were summed into a single index (alpha = .88). This treatment of these variables is consistent with previous uses of the credibility construct. Mean scores for individual variables are shown in Table 2.

RESULTS

This posttest-only experimental design with control ($n = 94$) exposed some participants to a viral video and advised that either the company lied about making the video but was later found out ($n = 159$) or that the company had

told the truth through the entire campaign and admitted being behind the video from the beginning ($n = 156$).

Differences in Perceived Relational Strategies Based on Disclosure

The hypothesis posited that an organization's failure to disclose in a social media environment would damage perception of relationship strategies. This hypothesis was tested by examining the change between the strength of the participant-reported relationship based on experimental cell. In this instance, the hypothesis posits that the lie cell would report lower relationship scores on all of the seven factors when performing an analysis of variance comparing relationship factor scores for all three groups (lie, truth, and control cells).

An initial ANOVA showed statistically significant differences were present based on cell for all of the seven relationship maintenance strategy factors: task sharing, $F(2, 390) = 37.38, p \leq .001$; communicated relational commitment, $F(2, 390) = 16.14, p \leq .001$; conversational human voice, $F(2, 390) = 55.61, p \leq .001$; responsiveness/customer service, $F(2, 390) = 5.59, p \leq .001$; dialogue, $F(2, 390) = 8.86, p \leq .001$; positivity/optimism, $F(2, 390) = 3.68, p \leq .05$; and responsiveness to criticism, $F(2, 390) = 4.13, p \leq .05$. A follow-up Bonferroni post-hoc test was then conducted to determine the specific statistically significant differences between groups. The hypothesis was partially supported for *communicated relational commitment*, *responsiveness/customer service*, *positivity/optimism*, and *responsiveness*.

In the task sharing factor, further analyses in the post-hoc tests showed that there were not statistically significant differences in the average scores on this factor between the two stimulus cells. The post-hoc test did, however, show a statistically significant difference between the mean score on this factor comparing the control group with the truth group (.72 less than control; $p \leq .001$), as well as statistically significant differences in the mean score for this factor comparing the control with the lie group (.89 less than control; $p < .001$). H1 is not supported for task sharing.

In the communicated relational commitment factor, the post-hoc tests showed that there were not statistically significant mean score differences between the control and truth cells. However, both control and truth cells average factor scores were statistically significant different and showed stronger communicated relational commitment relationships with publics than the lie cell. The control group was .57 higher than the lie cell ($p \leq .001$), and the truth group was .16 higher than the lie cell ($p \leq .001$). H1 was supported for communicated relational commitment.

In the conversational human voice factor, the post-hoc tests showed that the control group mean score for this factor was statistically significant

different and lower from both the truth (1.00 lower than truth; $p \leq .001$) and the lie (.87 lower than lie; $p \leq .001$) groups. However, the two stimuli groups' mean scores for this factor were not statistically significant different from one another. H1 was not supported for conversational human voice.

In the responsiveness/customer service factor, the post-hoc tests showed that the only statistically significant mean score difference was that the control group was .39 higher than the lie group ($p \leq .005$). H1 was supported for the *responsiveness/customer service* factor.

In the dialogue factor, the post-hoc tests revealed similar findings to the conversational human voice factor, as there was no statistically significant difference between the lie and truth cells. However, the control mean score for this factor was statistically significant lower than both the truth (.39 lower than truth; $p \leq .001$) and the lie (.45 lower than lie; $p \leq .001$) cells. H1 was not supported for dialogue.

In the positivity/optimism factor, the post-hoc tests showed no statistically significant mean difference between the control and either of the stimuli. However, the difference between the truth and the lie mean scores for this factor were statistically significant (lie was 2.48 lower than truth; $p \leq .05$). This was the largest mean score difference found in this data. H1 was supported for positivity/optimism.

In the responsiveness to criticism factor, the post-hoc tests showed that the only statistically significant mean score difference for this factor was present in that the truth cell was higher than the lie cell (2.48 difference; $p \leq .05$). H1 was supported for responsiveness to criticism.

Credibility

Similar to Kelleher (2009) in the examination of the correlation between relational strategy factors and relational outcomes like trust, RQ1 in this study examined how relationship factors might correlate with credibility. Credibility is used here because it is a key construct when considering ethics. To do this, the credibility index was correlated separately with each relationship maintenance strategy factor.

Credibility was significantly and positively correlated with: task sharing ($r = .50$; $p < .001$), communicated relational commitment ($r = .36$; $p < .001$), and responsiveness to criticism ($r = .30$; $p < .001$).

Next, RQ2 asked if credibility differed based on experimental cell. The overall ANOVA showed main effects, indicating that there were differences between how one assessed credibility based on the experimental condition, $F(2, 398) = 54.99$, $p \leq .001$. Credibility assessment was highest across the board among those in the control group ($M = 40.29$, $SD = 4.69$), followed by the truth cell ($M = 35.38$; $SD = 6.49$), and the lie cell ($M = 31.35$;

$SD = 7.53$). Follow-up examinations were conducted using Bonferroni, and revealed statistically significant interaction effects for each cell group comparison ($p \leq .001$ for all comparisons). As such, RQ2 is answered in that the control group on average assigned the greatest level of credibility to the organization. Those in the lie group where lack of disclosure about the source of the video occurred rated the organization the lowest on average in credibility.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to determine whether disclosure in social media campaigns, as one of several possible operationalizations of ethical behavior, might impact an organization–public relationship. Broadly, the data here among several of the relational maintenance strategies sends the strong message that lack of disclosure in a social media campaign will damage the organization–public relationship and the credibility of the organization. This experiment provides empirical support for the many ethical codes, suggesting best practice in public relations, and illustrates what can happen if and when an organization performs an unethical behavior online when communicating to their publics.

As more companies fall prey to poor public relations counsel and adopt communication methods and tactics that they would never consider in the real world (outside of the Internet), it is critical that public relations understand what unethical online campaigns may do to damage that ever-important organization–public relationship. Certainly, the data here support the proposition that particular components of the relationship construct are more negatively impacted by an unethical behavior than others. More generally, however, the results here indicate that organizations should take ownership of their social media campaigns and fully disclose their production of social content as suggested by numerous ethical codes used by the industry. As such, organizations should avoid unethical social media campaigns in which proper disclosure of involvement is not present. Indeed, the popular press has used the buzzword *transparency* to speak to the importance of disclosure (Scoble & Israel, 2006; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009), and the data here support the idea that without such transparency, a company is negatively impacted.

Relationship Maintenance Strategies

Driven by the relationship management theory, the focus of this study was set in examining what might impact organization–public relationships. Here

the previously developed relational maintenance strategy factors served as the dependent variable.

With regard to task sharing, it appears that whether the organization told the truth does not have as much impact as the publics having seen the video in the first place. That is, exposure to the video—regardless of ethical behavior—reduced publics' strength of relationship for task sharing. As such, the video, indeed, has an impact, however both scenarios are adverse when considering this factor. Recalling the items that make up task sharing, the factor focuses on the organization's ability to essentially meet its responsibilities and do its job. It appears that when publics see a viral video such as the one presented here, they have less confidence in the organization as being able to do its job. This is likely because the humorous video was a departure from normal advertising and, possibly, may not have been congruent with the overall image the publics had of the organization. More work in this area is needed to determine if the mere use of a viral video campaign has a negative impact (regardless of disclosure practices) or if this finding is an artifact of a variable not measure here (such as congruency with organization image, etc.).

For the communicated relational commitment factor, the data show that the only damage done to a organization–public relationship occurs when the organization acts unethically. This factor focused on the organization's desire to build a relationship with publics. With no difference on this factor between the control and truth cells, we find that the viral stimulus didn't strengthen the relationship at all. However, misuse of the communication tool can definitely damage a relationship with regard to communicated relational commitment. There were similar results for the responsiveness/customer service factor. These findings underscore the importance of ethical behavior outlined in the ethical codes guiding public relations, with particular support for the act of disclosure. As this experiment posited from the beginning, based both on previous relationship and ethics research, failure to foster a positive relationship management strategy (in this case communicated relational commitment and responsiveness/customer service) can result damage to the organization–public relationship. Given that these particular relational maintenance strategies speak to the importance that the organization sees in having a relationship with the public, organizations should take note that this finding plainly presents that lack of disclosure in online public relations campaigns will damage the organization–public relationship.

For conversational human voice, it was evident that exposure to the video increased one's assessment of the relationship with regard to the organization's communicated personality. Both the *truth* and the *lie* groups had higher conversational human voice scores than the control, however,

the differences between the groups was not significant. Similarly, the dialogue factor showed the same results with higher scores than the control regardless of ethical behavior. This indicates that the presence of a video can increase the organization–public relationship for these two constructs, regardless of ethical behavior. More research in the future may show a widening gap between the truth and lie scores, but as of now it is apparent that the production of a viral video personalizes the organization and feeling of two-way communication. This is likely due to the fact that viral videos are posted on Web sites like YouTube that allow viewers to leave comments and the content of the videos is less of a hard sell that takes a humorous approach to discussing the product.

The findings on the positivity/optimism factor reveal that the video makes a significant difference if it is unethical. Participants in the control and truth cells rated this construct similarly, but the largest meaningful difference in this project occurred here on the positivity/optimism factor. It is suggested that this is so because the viewers take a viral video at face value when viewing a piece they know the company made; however, when viewers discover that an organization lied, it challenges and erodes their opinion of the organization.

Credibility

In this study, credibility served as a secondary relational outcome when the specific ethical practice of disclosure was manipulated. Previous studies, such as Sweetser and Metzgar (2007), found that credibility was not related to relationship strategies, and this study sought to take the credibility construct further by determining if public perceptions of credibility (including a measure of perceived ethics) would change based on the ethical practice of disclosure.

Interestingly, credibility of the organization was highest in the control group. Even so, the mean credibility score for the control group was squarely neutral with regard to participants' assessment of the credibility of the organization. Exposure to a viral video where proper disclosure was not made (the lie cell) resulted in the lowest credibility scores, bringing participants' assessment of credibility to the lowest category on the five-point Likert scale (strongly disagreeing that the company was credible). This shows that failure to follow the disclosure guidelines laid out by public relations organizations and governing bodies (PRSA, WOMMA, SMBC, FTC) has an adverse affect on how credible one's publics find the organization.

Moving to the gray area of these findings, credibility for the organization also decreased when the participants knew the organization was behind the

video and proper disclosure was made. This suggests that content within the video or the style of the video impacted credibility. More research should be done comparing the impact video formats—such as appeals, news videos, mockumentary style, etc.—before assertions that presentation style impacts credibility, however the initial indication based on the data here suggests this is a valid area for future research.

Limitations and Future Research

This initial work into what can damage, as opposed to build, a relationship with one's publics opens new opportunities for public relations scholars. As such, more work must be done. In particular, scholars should investigate how specific relational strategies might predict relational outcomes (be it Hon & Grunig's, 1999, outcomes or credibility, as used here). Scholars should actively investigate the impact of nondisclosure on the voice and dialogue factors, especially with regard to their impact on corporate perception, as well as relationship maintenance. Additionally, public relations scholars should continue to employ scales for relational outcomes that reveal more nuances within the construct and dig deeper. Scholars should investigate other social media campaigns, to build on the knowledge gained by the viral video campaign studied here.

This research is not without limitation. The findings here should be considered carefully, and not too broadly so as to be considered a full account of the potential for unethical behavior to damage relationship. This research was quite focused in that it posited that exposure to social media videos without proper disclosure could do damage the organization–public relationship. One social media tactic—the use of viral video—was examined here. A concept as complicated as relationship can certainly not be created through exposure to a series of video clips. Additionally, a single operationalization of ethics was used (disclosure). Ethics and ethical practice can certainly be operationalized in numerous other ways, and this limitation provides an opportunity for future scholars to begin work in that area. Furthermore, although generalizations are made here extrapolating the current findings out to organizations as a whole, it must be noted that this experiment only tested a specific organization (BMW) and the results may not generalize to other companies in other industries.

Here a convenience sample was used, which is known to reduce generalizability. Although the sample selected here was specifically chosen because of the demographic's ubiquitous adoption of online video, future studies can cast a wider net to also examine publics outside of the targeted demographic/psychographic. Such research would provide insight as to whether particular campaigns or communication behaviors have the

potential to damage relationships with publics that lie outside of the main target for a campaign. To put it another way, future research could examine whether unethical behavior in social media campaigns has the potential to take latent publics and turn them into an active yet detracting force.

Also limiting this study was the use of an existing social media campaign as a stimulus. Certainly the use of an existing campaign added authenticity to the data collected, however by using the existing stimulus the researcher lost control of other variables that may have confounded the results.

Although several correlations were found, the strongest correlation discovered could only be classified as moderate, and many of the correlations were weak. More work should be done to further determine if this was an artifact of the relationship, sample size, or instrument.

Finally, more research should be conducted on the long-term impact of relationship. Future research should consider a panel study where the strength of the damage incurred by an unethical campaign is measured to see if the relationship continues to deteriorate or if it bounces back.

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