

7-2016

# The Role of Public Relations in Social Capital

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## **Disciplines**

Communication | Communication Technology and New Media

## **Comments**

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## **The Role of Public Relations in Social Capital**

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### **Abstract**

Public relations research has traditionally focused on how public relations efforts make organizations more effective. Recently, scholars have argued for the broader role of public relations in society. That is, how can public relations be used to improve society rather than simply making organizations more effective? Existing studies have emphasized the relationship between internal public relations and organizational social capital. Lack of scholarly attention has been paid to how public relations efforts affect citizens' social capital in general. To fill the gap in this area, this study examines how different types of public relations efforts contribute to citizens' social capital. Specifically, this study uses data from the 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project '*Social Side of the Internet*' survey to examine the influence of public relations efforts by various organizations in individuals' social capital. Overall, the analyses suggest that organizations' face-to-face meetings with their members enhance interpersonal trust and civic engagement, and that organizations' strategic use of social media boosts civic engagement, whereas strategic communication via email, blogs, and websites *decreases* civic engagement. This study provides empirical evidence and practical implications for the important role of strategic social media use and interpersonal communication in enhancing social capital.

**Keywords:** public relations, strategic communication, social media, Internet use, traditional media use, social capital

## **The Role of Public Relations in Social Capital**

Traditionally, public relations research focuses on how public relations efforts make organizations more effective. Increasingly, public relations scholars have argued for the central role of public relations in reviving community relations (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988) and fostering social capital, civic engagement, and democracy (e.g., Taylor, 2009; Taylor, 2010). Social capital is defined as encompassing various forms of citizen engagement in community affairs and features of social life such as networks, norms, and trust which enable citizens to effectively work together to improve society at large (e.g., Putnam, 1995). It typically includes three major dimensions: social relations/connections/networks, the nature of social relations such as norms of generalized reciprocity and trust (interpersonal trust and institutional trust) that are embodied within the relationship (Paxton, 1999) and civic engagement. In this study, we focus on interpersonal trust and civic engagement as major components of social capital.

Trust is the expectation that “people have of each other, of the organizations and institutions in which they live, and of the natural and moral social orders, that set the fundamental understandings for their lives” (Barber, 1983, p. 165). People with high trust often feel connected to one another in a community and are willing to give most people the benefit of the doubt (Delli Carpini, 2004). Individuals with higher trust are more likely to be members of voluntary associations, socialize with others informally, volunteer, and cooperate with others to solve community problems (Orbell & Dawes, 1991). This trust occurs between an individual and other individuals, or between an individual and social, political institutions.

Civic engagement involves individuals working to make a difference in their communities. By doing so, they develop knowledge, values, skills, and motivation to make that difference (Ehrlich, 2000). Civic engagement activities include community volunteer work, consumer activism, and involvement in social causes in areas including the environment and the economy (Bennett, 2003). Civic engagement has been classified as both an individual and a community-level phenomenon (Lin, 2001). Putnam (2000a) views it as a community-level quality, while Bourdieu (2001) suggests that individuals possess different levels of civic engagement based on their personal virtues. Public relations in this study is defined as building relationships and connections between an organization and its publics. Public relations media, be it traditional media (i.e., newspapers and television), interactive media

(e.g., Internet, social networking sites), controlled media (i.e., newsletters, direct mail), events/group communication (i.e., rallies, conferences), or one-on-one communication (i.e., lobbying, personalized visits) classified by Hallahan (2001), are the major mechanisms of creating, maintaining, and utilizing social capital.

Several studies have focused on the relationship between internal public relations and social capital (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011) and between organizational communication and civil society (Taylor, 2009). Lack of scholarly attention has been paid to how public relations efforts affect citizens' social capital in general with the exception of Zhang and Seltzer (2010). To fill the vacuum in this area, this study examines the influence of public relations efforts in social capital by using data from the 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project *Social Side of the Internet* survey. Specifically, this study investigates the relationship between various public relations efforts by social, civic, professional, and religious organizations and social capital. The focal independent variable, *public relations efforts*, includes the use of face-to-face meetings, email, message boards, websites and blogs, and social media (Facebook or Twitter) by various types of organizations to communicate with their members. Dependent variables include social capital (*interpersonal trust* and *civic engagement*).

## **Literature Review**

### **Overview of Public Relations and Social Capital**

As public relations focuses on building and maintaining relationships between an organization and its publics, social capital provides a deeper meaning of relationships for the community and society at large as well as for the individuals and organizations. Public relations scholars have examined the role of public relations in social capital and citizenship behavior (e.g., Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Luoma-aho, 2009; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010), but the concept of social capital has been applied to the field of public relations only moderately. Luoma-aho (2005, 2006) focused on theorizing social capital in public relations. She argued that social capital is the resource that an organization may possess via networks of trust and reciprocity among its various publics and that communication with an organization's publics is vital not only for an organization's survival but also is valuable by itself for its legitimacy and reputation. According to Sommerfeldt (2013), building social capital is a public relations activity. He states, "as a means to create shared meaning, voice collective opinion, and build

relationships among groups, the burden of social capital creation lies squarely in the court of public relations” (p. 287). Past public relations studies have examined the relationship-building role within organizations in civil societies (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Doerfel, 2003). Specifically, the role of dialogue in the formation of relationships has been the central focus. Kent and Taylor (2002) explicated the concept of dialogue as being based on the acknowledgement of the diverse values of others, facilitation of participation, and an emphasis on mutual benefit with like-minded individuals.

From a public relations point of view, dialogue allows organizations to develop relationships with its publics and facilitate interaction through public forums such as town meetings and community workshops (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In fact, organizations who participate in face-to-face communication will be well-placed to gauge the level of social capital among stakeholders (Willis, 2012). Two major types of social capital are bonding and bridging. “Bonding social capital is found between individuals in tightly-knit, emotionally chosen relationships, such as family and close friends. Bridging social capital...stems from weak ties, which are loose connections between individuals who may provide useful information or new perspectives for one another but typically not emotional support” (Steinfeld, Ellison & Lampe, 2008, p. 436). For public relations practitioners, aligning organizational causes with those that an individual’s close friends and family support will help an organization create a bond with that individual, which will build bonding social capital, while bridging social capital is more appropriate for disseminating new professional and career information from diverse social networks.

In line with these concepts, prior studies have discovered that individuals are more likely to connect with people they already know or with whom they have a connection with (Steinfeld, Ellison, Lampe & Vitak, 2012). Specifically, Steinfeld et al. (2012) found that college students’ Facebook usage enhanced both bridging and bonding social capital but it had the strongest impact on bridging social capital. However, the application of social capital in public relations has produced a mixed bag of evidence for its benefits. Hazelton and Kennan (2000) examined the role of organizational social capital in an organization’s bottomline such as reduced transaction costs, increased productivity, quality, customer satisfaction, and organizational advantage. They posit that the nature of the outcomes predicated on social capital is less easily observed and more uncertain compared to other

exchange types. For example, effectively managed relational communication can improve employee relations, while transaction costs are grounded in the availability of social capital, and its absence is reflected in a decline in trust.

### **The Influence of Public Relations on Trust**

Of the major characteristics in the social capital literature, trust may be the most prevalent (Putnam, 2000b; Sommerfeldt, 2011) and the most important characteristic in organization-public relationships definitions (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Huang, 1997). Trust is also the most relevant variable of study in public relations research on social capital, especially as a relational feature in organizations (Kennan & Hazelton, 2006). Along with networks and norms, trust enables members of a society to act together more efficiently to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1995). Trust can be fragile or resilient (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999). Fragile trust is dependent on the possible likelihood of incentives or rewards, and it is most likely not to last once benefits and costs are not perceived as equal. Relationships based on this type of trust emphasize the need for formal exchanges of communication that constitute public obligation (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999). Resilient trust, on the other hand, is based on stronger links and is not broken easily (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999). Communication within a relationship based on resilient trust tends to be more informal and requires little maintenance.

From an organizational perspective, trust can become an “orientation toward risk” and an “orientation toward other people and toward society as a whole” (Kramer, 1999). Jin (2010) suggests that higher levels of trust may generate collaborative values and behavior in organizations and help establish relationships within communities. In fact, if people frequently observe organizations attempting to build a communal relationship with their local communities in the vein of partnership, people will tend to place higher levels of trust and confidence in those organizations (Jin & Lee, 2013). And, the more genuine that relationship between the organization and its community is perceived, the more resilient trust between the two parties will become.

However, the question of how organizations will build trust within communities and with its members remains. Taylor (2009) suggests that public relations practices can play an important role in nurturing relationships and bringing greater capacity to the community and the organization. Specifically, public relations campaigns that seek to foster interactions among

the members of the organization and members of the community may result in more solid relationships, greater trust, and better capability to address shared issues (Taylor, 2009).

### **The Influence of Public Relations on Civic Engagement**

In order to increase civic engagement, an individual may participate in activities for self-interest or do so for the greater good of one's community. According to Patrick (1998), the basic core of civic engagement is an individual's interaction with their society and community. Many scholars have argued that it is the responsibility of public relations practitioners to improve communities by engaging individuals in the community building process (Leeper, 1986, 2000; Taylor, 2011). Public relations can serve as the bridge between an organization and its publics (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988), which can lead to creating civic engagement outside the organization. Through various campaigns focusing on community building, organizations can provide members an opportunity to address shared issues with their community (Jin & Lee, 2013). Public relations also plays a crucial role in fostering communal values including alliances and partnerships with the local community (Jin & Lee, 2013).

### **Influence of Interpersonal Communication**

Interpersonal communication, be it group communication (direct interpersonal communication between the representatives of an organization and a group of people) or one-on-one communication (face-to-face contact using oral communication or interpersonal media using telephones, newsletters, and other correspondences), plays an important role in achieving an organization's objectives. Hallahan (2001) proposed an integrated public relations media model for program planning and divided public relations media into five broad types: Public media, interactive media, controlled media, events/group communication, and one-on-one communication, and compared and contrasted the features that differentiate the five types of public relations media. To Hallahan (2001), group communication is mainly used to mobilize people to take actions and reinforce their preexisting beliefs and values and one-on-one communication is particularly useful in obtaining commitments and solving problems.

For public relations to foster social engagement, the quality of relationships between the organization, individuals, and the community must be strong (Sommerfeldt, 2012).



Promoting volunteerism is one way public relations practitioners can encourage social engagement. According to Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009), fundraising for nongovernmental organizations, volunteering to help the needy, and participating in community service all are important components of civic engagement. In general, communication researchers investigated the mobilizing influence of both media communication and interpersonal communication on citizens' civic engagement (e.g., McLeod et al., 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Stamm, Emig, and Hesse (1997) maintained that interpersonal discussion served as "the primary mechanisms for community integration" (p. 106). McLeod et al. (1999) found that although interpersonal communication played a modest role in institutionalized participation (i.e., voting, contacting a public official), it played the strongest role in generating democratic deliberation on local issues. Zhang and Seltzer (2010) integrated the organization-public relationship (OPR) model in the public relations literature and social capital theory and found strong influence of interpersonal political discussion in both civic participation and political participation.

### **Influence of Online Communication**

Although some scholars believe that relationships created online are not as meaningful as offline ones (Nie, 2001), the Internet can be used to increase social capital with people whom it would be impossible to interact with face-to-face (Kennan, Hazleton, Janoske & Short, 2008). Through the interactive capabilities of the Internet, people can develop a social network that extends beyond their local community (Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001), and organizations can form meaningful relationships with people in other online and offline communities (Best & Krueger, 2006; Hampton & Wellman, 2002). In fact, Internet use can supplement organizational involvement. In their 2001 study, Wellman et al. discovered that a person's involvement in online computer clubs is positively associated with involvement in offline clubs. Building relationships online can also help organizations reach more people in a more efficient manner. For example, organizations can distribute more information through online networks and interact and engage with key publics through online mechanisms (Wellman et al., 2001). Another advantage of using the Internet is to enhance civic and political participation. According to Vitak et al. (2011), "the Internet supplements traditional methods of participation (e.g., posting videos from campaign rallies online) and provides additional outlets for participation that do not exist offline (e.g., personal blogs, tackling political issues)" (p. 108).

Similar to the Internet, social networking sites (SNSs) have shown positive effects on civic engagement. Sites such YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter differ from the Internet and other forms of social media through its three main unique features: (1) a public or semi-public profiles constructed by the users, (2) a series of connections to other users within the system, and (3) the ability to view one's own connections and the connections made by others within the system (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Put another way, SNSs offer a public display of connection that provides a kind of visualization of the network so that users can easily examine one another's connections on SNS profiles (Steinfeld et al, 2012). SNSs provide organizations platforms to mobilize individuals to volunteer and fundraise for various causes (Nielsen, 2011; Obar et al., 2012). Additionally, these sites not only facilitate the acquisition of information, but also provide a forum for discussion and relevance with other members of a particular social network (Zuniga, Nakwon, & Valenzuela, 2011).

In public relations, SNSs offer practitioners an opportunity to build relationships, solve problems, and crowd source (Kent, 2013). Through the relevant literature on the relationship between SNSs and social capital, three consistent themes are evident. First, identity information and information disclosure on SNSs influence usages and outcomes (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010). Burke et al. (2010) discovered that the more directed communication efforts are, the stronger the relationship between the senders and receivers is. Specifically, due to the personal information featured on SNS profiles, users feel more connected to one another, which leads to more familiarity among individuals and more bonding. Second, SNSs blend online and offline behavior for social action (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). SNS users tend to view the primary audience for their SNS profiles as people with whom they share an offline connection with. Therefore, users build stronger relationships with close connections through SNS engagement, which produces closer offline relationships (Ellison et al., 2007). Third, distinct social capital benefits associated with SNS use such as bonding and bridging social capital are evident (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2010). SNSs provide users another avenue to strengthen relationships with both strong and weak ties, which leads to higher levels of bonding and bridging social capital (Ellison et al., 2007).

Most research examining SNSs influence on civic and political participation involves Facebook and its various features (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela, et al., 2008). Facebook

Groups allow for discussions based on common interests and activities (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela., 2009). And, once individuals belong to a group, they can receive mobilizing information that may not be available any place else (Park et al., 2009). Individuals who use Facebook Groups to learn about events are more likely to actively engage in civic actions taking place around them. In fact, a number of participants stated that they frequently used Facebook Groups to organize and support civic meetings and activities, such as hobby and environmental clubs (Park et al., 2009). Facebook Groups can provide public relations practitioners a forum to organize individuals who have weak ties to an organization or cause to socialize with others on the basis of social issues and common interests. Public relations can contribute to the building of social capital through the use of SNSs by employing trust, reciprocity, and engagement. From a top-down approach, organizations can encourage employees and consumers to enact civil society by utilizing SNSs to reach audiences that were impossible to reach before (Sommerfeldt, 2013). Although scholars have criticized SNSs and similar media tools as contributing to the erosion of community life (e.g., Putnam, 2000a), these sites are providing an avenue for individuals to become socially engaged with organizations and their community.

### **Hypotheses**

This study seeks to identify which public relations efforts utilized by organizations influence social capital. Specifically, we focus on offline tactics including organizations' face-to-face meetings and online tactics such as Internet use and social media use. Based on the literature review above, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Organizations' face-to-face meetings will have a positive influence on interpersonal trust.

H1b: Organizations' face-to-face meetings will have a positive influence on civic engagement.

H2a: Organizations' general Internet use will have a positive influence on interpersonal trust.

H2b: Organizations' general Internet use will have a positive influence on civic engagement.

H3a: Organizations' social media use will have a positive influence on interpersonal trust.

H3b: Organizations' social media use will have a positive influence on civic engagement.

## Method

### Data

Data for this study came from the 2010 *Social Side of the Internet* survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011). The theme of the data centers on the role of SNSs in civic group formation and participation (Rainie et al., 2011). The fieldwork of this national representative telephone survey, which utilized the random-digit dialing technique, was conducted from November 23, 2010 to December 21, 2010 by the Princeton Survey Research Associates International. The interviews were conducted with adults aged 18 and above to both landlines ( $n = 1,555$ ) and cell phones ( $n = 748$ ) with a total of 2,303 respondents. The response rate was 11% for the landline sample and 15.8% for the cellular sample.

### Measures

Dependent variables included *interpersonal trust* and *civic engagement*. *Interpersonal trust* was a single item measure of whether the respondent agreed that “most people can be trusted” (50.6%) or “you can’t be too careful” (49.4%). This item was dummy coded (0 - *you can’t be too careful*, 1 - *most people can be trusted*). *Civic engagement* was an additive measure of 27 items. Respondents were asked if they were “currently active in any of these types of groups or organizations, or not”: community groups or neighborhood associations (22.2%), church groups or other religious or spiritual organizations (45.3%), sports or recreation leagues (25.1%), hobby groups or clubs (19.5%), professional or trade associations (23.3%), parent groups or organizations (13.4%), performance or arts groups (12.2%), social or fraternal clubs, sororities or fraternities (9.7%), youth groups (10.1%), veterans groups or organizations (8.6%), literacy, discussion or study groups (12.5%), charitable or volunteer organizations (25.4%), consumer groups (26.8%), farm organizations (4.9%), travel clubs (6.2%), ethnic or cultural groups (5.5%), support groups for people with a particular illness or personal situation (19.1%), alumni associations (17.8%), sports fantasy leagues (7.0%), gaming communities (5.0%), national or local organizations for older adults (20.5%), environmental groups (8.8%), political parties or organizations (17.6%), labor unions (8.3%), fan groups for a particular TV show, movie, celebrity, or musical performer (5.5%), fan

groups for a particular sports team or athlete (9.7%), and fan groups for a particular brand, company or product (3.4%). The scale was dummy coded (0 - *not active*, 1 - *active*). Respondents were asked about their different levels of participation in those organizations such as taking a leadership role, attending meetings or events, contributing money, or volunteering one's time to a group one was active in. The intensity of their active participation in those organizations was also dummy coded (0 - *no*, 1 - *yes*). An individual's intensity of participation in each organization was the sum of one's participation in each organization combined with their participation levels. All 27 items were combined to form the *civic engagement* index.

Independent variables included *organizations' public relations efforts* and *demographic variables*. Organizations' public relations efforts included three variables: *holding regular in-person meetings* (60.8%), *general Internet use*, and *SNS use*. *General Internet use* was an additive measure of four items. Respondents were asked whether different organizations they are presently active in organize group activities or communicate with members via email or electronic newsletter (61.7%), host online discussion groups or message boards (29.5%), have their own websites (54.7%) and have their own blogs (23.1%). Respondents were also asked whether different organizations they are presently active in have a page on a social networking site like Facebook (36.2%) and communicate with members through Twitter (11.7%). These two items were combined to form the index of *SNS use*. In regards to demographic variables, 54.1 percent of the sample respondents were female. On average, respondents were 50 years old ( $SD = 17.99$ ). Respondents on the whole attended some college ( $SD = 1.66$ ). Of the respondents, the majority were Caucasian (78.2%), followed by Black (12.2%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1.8%), mixed race (2.2%), Native American (1.6%), and other (1.0%). Race was dummy coded (0 - *other*, 1 - *Caucasian*). With respect to *ideology*, on average, respondents were moderately conservative ( $M = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ). The average 2009 family income was \$40,000 to under \$50,000 ( $SD = 2.42$ ).

### **Data Analysis Strategies**

Hierarchical regression analyses were performed to test the hypotheses of this study to determine whether organizations' public relations efforts exerted significant influences on interpersonal trust and civic engagement. Demographic variables were entered as the first

block, followed by the focal independent variables: organizations' public relations efforts.

## Results

H1a predicted that organizations' face-to-face meetings with their members would have a positive impact on interpersonal trust. As seen in Table 1, after controlling for demographic influence, organizations' frequent face-to-face meetings with their members had a significant positive effect on interpersonal trust ( $\beta = .06, p < .05$ ), as a result, H1a was supported. Similarly, H1b posited that organizations' face-to-face meetings with their members had a significant positive effect on civic engagement. It did have positive influence on civic engagement ( $\beta = .31, p < .001$ ). Therefore, H1b was also supported.

H2a maintained that organizations' general Internet use would have a positive effect on interpersonal trust after controlling for the influence of demographic variables. Based on Table 1, organizations' general Internet use did not exert any significant positive influence on interpersonal trust. Therefore, H2a was not supported. H2b posited that organizations' general Internet use would have a positive effect on civic engagement. It was found that organizations' general Internet use had a negative influence on civic engagement ( $\beta = -.07, p < .05$ ), the opposite of what H2b predicted. Thus, H2b was not supported, either.

H3a predicted that organizations' strategic social media use would have a positive effect on interpersonal trust. As seen from Table 1, organizations' strategic social media use did not have a significant positive influence on interpersonal trust. So H3a was not supported. H3b stated that organizations' strategic social media use would have a positive effect on civic engagement. It was found that it did exert positive influence on civic engagement ( $\beta = .06, p < .05$ ). Therefore, H3b was supported.

Concerning the influence of demographic variables on interpersonal trust and civic engagement, older people tended to trust others in general ( $\beta = .07, p < .01$ ) but age was not a significant factor in civic engagement. Females were less trusting of people in general ( $\beta = -.06, p < .01$ ) but gender did not make a difference in people's civic engagement. Educated individuals were more likely to trust people in general ( $\beta = .14, p < .001$ ) and engage in civic activities ( $\beta = .09, p < .001$ ). Wealthy individuals trusted people in general more ( $\beta = .14, p < .001$ ) and were more active in civic engagement ( $\beta = .08, p < .001$ ). Caucasians were more

likely to trust people in general ( $\beta = .10, p < .001$ ) but less likely to participate in civic actions ( $\beta = -.04, p < .01$ ). In a similar fashion, liberals were more likely to trust other people ( $\beta = .05, p < .05$ ) but less likely to participate in civic activities ( $\beta = -.07, p < .01$ ).

## Discussion

The public relations discipline is closely related to the society at large, but the crucial role of public relations in society is often neglected by public relations scholars. The social capital theory popularized by Robert Putnam (e.g., 1995a, 1995b, 2000b) has generated tremendous amount of literature in political science, sociology, and mass communication, but is rarely applied to the field of public relations. Increasingly, some scholars have advocated the central role of public relations in reviving community relations (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988) and fostering social capital, civic engagement, and democracy (e.g., Taylor, 2009; Taylor, 2010). However, the emphasis has been on the impact of internal public relations and organizational communication in generating social capital (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Sommerfeldt & Taylor, 2011), building trust and legitimacy (Luoma-aho, 2009), and revitalizing civil society (Taylor, 2009). Some scholars sketched a research roadmap on the relationship between public relations and social capital and civil society but sporadic empirical studies in this area have been conducted (Kennan & Hazleton, 2006).

This study provides important empirical evidence for the positive role public relations plays in fostering social capital and civic engagement, in particular through strategic social media use and interpersonal communication. SNSs, as a community of connections, provide community members with a means of building one's own social connections via online interaction. As such, SNSs encourage user participation which is primarily seen in the form of providing feedback, sharing information, and generating content. Overall, organizations' strategic social media use boosts civic engagement, confirming the results from the limited empirical work in this area (Obar et al., 2012, Park et al., 2009; Valenzuela, 2009). This finding points to great potential for social media as a mobilizing tool for organizations in revitalizing democratic governance and societal functioning. For example, unique SNS features like Facebook Groups (Park et al., 2009) or specific hashtag use on Twitter, provide organizations a forum for discussion and relevance with specific publics, which could lead to mobilization and participation offline (Zuniga et al., 2011). And, because SNS users view the primary audience for their SNS profiles as their offline connections (Ellison et al., 2007),

building connections with influential SNS users can lead to more engagement in civic affairs as they may encourage their SNS connections to participate in similar activities.

In addition, organizations' regular face-to-face meetings with their members enhance interpersonal trust and stimulate engagement in civic affairs, which is compatible with the findings from previous studies ( McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, Moy, Horowitz et al., 1999; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010). One-on-one communication is generally used in a public relations program to build trust, obtain commitments from individuals in positions of influence, and revolve problems. This finding is important because trust and legitimacy are crucial for corporations and organizations to survive in this increasingly global and unpredictable “reputation society” where people tend to question authority and corporations. Organizations are forced to legitimize their decisions on a constant basis (Luoma-aho, 2009). And, as the results indicate, the more one-on-one interaction an organization has with a specific individual, the less the individual sees the organization as a faceless entity. Therefore, the more interaction and “face time” an organization has with their publics, the more trust and eventual engagement. The analysis also indicates the limits of public relations efforts in stimulating social capital and civic engagement. For instance, Internet use does not make any difference in enhancing interpersonal trust or civic engagement. As Kennan and Hazleton (2006) indicate, social capital is best considered as a resource, and it is important to distinguish resources from the ability to activate these resources.

Findings of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. Luoma-aho (2009) argued that public relations theory tends to focus on how public relations endeavors help organizations achieve their goals but not the consequences of public relations efforts on the society at large. Social capital theory allows the field to focus on the larger societal benefits accompanied by healthy social relations and social connections. In a practical sense, the findings of this study shed light on the mechanisms of social capital creation, that is, the important role of strategic social media use and interpersonal discussion. As the benefits of social capital such as relationships, interaction, and cooperation become more apparent, the importance of social capital for the broadening identity of public relations and practice will increase accordingly.



One major limitation of this study lies in the inherent disadvantage of doing secondary analysis of an existing dataset though the Pew Internet & American Life Project reliably provides quality survey data for academic use. Users of secondary data are limited to the existing variables because there is no way to go back for additional information (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). For instance, various forms of public relations efforts such as traditional media use, Internet use, and social media usage by organizations were measured through the use of simple “yes” or “no” questions. Similarly, interpersonal trust was a single item measure. Future research could use interval level measurements to gain more accurate estimates and multiple items to measure interpersonal trust. Because the Pew Internet & American Life Project only examines Internet’s and social media’s impact on political and civic life, future research should also investigate the effects of the nature of social media use on offline and online participation. This study has only examined the influence of social media use on interpersonal trust and civic engagement. Future research should also investigate the influence of specific activities on SNSs on issue-specific attitudes and a variety of civic activities. A cross-sectional design cannot establish causal direction. Therefore, future research may consider utilizing a panel design to survey the same respondents at different points in time to delineate the long term causal effects of public relations efforts on social capital. This study only examines generalized interpersonal trust as one of the dependent variables. Future research should expand the outcomes of organizations’ public relations efforts to include, among others, institutional trust and particularized trust, and other forms of organizational outcomes. Future studies can also explore the influence of public relations efforts in different types of social capital such as bridging social capital and bonding social capital. From a public relations angle, bridging social capital may be viewed as the relationship between an organization and its external publics while bonding social capital is vital for the relationship between an organization and its internal audiences such as employees. Bonding social capital is instrumental for establishing a sense of community and organizational identity within an organization and bridging social capital is “better for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Both types of social capital are important and a delicate balance between the two is optimal for public relations practices. Social capital tends to be considered always positive to those possessing it, but it can be harmful to those outside the group (Putnam, 2000b). In the public relations context, an organization may have a great deal of bonding social capital, but external publics may feel ignored. Future research should explore the relationships between different types of public

relations media and the nature and types of social capital to get a nuanced picture of public relations influence on the social capital processes.

The significant findings of the importance of strategic social media use also call for further linking SNS research to the uses and gratifications theory and investigate how differential motives for using SNSs affect people's social capital (e.g., Bode, 2012). Like the social capital theory, many research studies seem to suggest that social media are almost always positive and neglect the potential unintended negative consequences of social media. Social media are not panacea and they do not necessarily increase social capital. It depends on how organizations utilize it. More studies should examine the limitations of social media in the social capital processes. This study has focused on the channel effects of various media communication. Future studies should examine the influence of public relations messages on social capital (Beaudoin, Thorson, & Hong, 2006). Finally, this study has investigated the direct influence of public relations endeavor on social capital. Future research should examine the contingent conditions or moderators for social capital in the public relations context.

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## Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Interpersonal Trust and Civic Engagement

Independent Variables	Interpersonal Trust	Civic Engagement
<b>Demographics</b>		
Age	.07**	.02
Gender (female coded higher)	-.06**	.02
Education	.14***	.09***
Income	.14***	.08***
Race (Caucasian coded higher)	.10***	-.04*
Ideology (liberal coded higher)	.05*	-.07**
R <sup>2</sup> (%)	<b>9.1***</b>	<b>5.4***</b>
<b>Public Relations Efforts</b>		
Hold regular in-person meetings	.06*	.31***
General Internet use	-.01	-.07*
Social media use	.01	.06*
Incremental R <sup>2</sup> (%)	<b>.3 n.s.</b>	<b>7.2***</b>
Total R <sup>2</sup> (%)	<b>9.4***</b>	<b>12.6***</b>

*Note.* The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$