

2014

The Role of Public Relations in Social Capital and Civic Engagement

Weiwu Zhang
Texas Tech University

Alan Abitbol
University of Dayton, aabitbol1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/cmm_fac_pub

 Part of the [Civic and Community Engagement Commons](#), [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Zhang, Weiwu and Abitbol, Alan, "The Role of Public Relations in Social Capital and Civic Engagement" (2014). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 45.
http://ecommons.udayton.edu/cmm_fac_pub/45

This Conference Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

The Role of Public Relations in Social Capital and Civic Engagement

Abstract

Public relations scholars have increasingly argued for the broader role of public relations and strategic communication in society (e.g., Taylor, 2010). That is, how can knowledge of public relations be used to make society better rather than simply making organizations more effective? This study examines how different types of public relations and strategic communication efforts contribute to citizens' social capital and civic engagement. Specifically, this study uses data from the 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project 'Social Side of the Internet' survey to examine the relationship between various strategic communication efforts by social, civic, professional, and religious organizations and individuals' social capital and civic engagement.

Overall, the analyses suggest that organizations' face-to-face meetings with their members foster interpersonal trust and both social-oriented and private-oriented civic engagement, and that organizations' strategic communication via social media boosts both social-oriented and private-oriented civic engagement, whereas strategic communication via email, blogs and websites decreases social-oriented civic engagement. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings for the larger role of public relations and strategic communication in social capital and civic engagement are discussed.

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Communication | Public Relations and Advertising | Religion

Comments

This document is provided for download in compliance with the publisher's policy on self-archiving. Permission documentation is on file.

The Role of Public Relations in Social Capital and Civic Engagement

Weiwu Zhang
Alan Abitbol

Texas Tech University

Abstract

Public relations scholars have increasingly argued for the broader role of public relations and strategic communication in society (e.g., Taylor, 2010). That is, how can knowledge of public relations be used to make society better rather than simply making organizations more effective? This study examines how different types of public relations and strategic communication efforts contribute to citizens' social capital and civic engagement. Specifically, this study uses data from the 2010 Pew Internet and American Life Project '*Social Side of the Internet*' survey to examine the relationship between various strategic communication efforts by social, civic, professional, and religious organizations and individuals' social capital and civic engagement. Overall, the analyses suggest that organizations' face-to-face meetings with their members foster interpersonal trust and both social-oriented and private-oriented civic engagement, and that organizations' strategic communication via social media boosts both social-oriented and private-oriented civic engagement, whereas strategic communication via email, blogs and websites *decreases* social-oriented civic engagement. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings for the larger role of public relations and strategic communication in social capital and civic engagement are discussed.

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 and strategic communication in reviving community relations (Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988) and fostering social capital, civic engagement, and democracy (e.g., Taylor, 2009; Taylor, 2010). Social capital in this paper 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. 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 to the economy (Bennett, 2003).

Two common debates within the civic engagement literature are whether it is an individual or 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. Whether the engagement is for personal gain or for the community is based on the goals of the individual. According to Mascherini, Saltelli and Vidoni (2007), private engagement refers to individuals' participation in those organizations that are geared toward their private interests and social engagement refers to individuals' participation in those organizations that aim at serving the community at large.

Public relations in this study is defined as building relationships and connections between an organization and its publics. Public relations media, be they public media (i.e., newspapers and television), interactive media (i.e., 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.

The advent of Internet media, especially social media, has transformed the practices of public relations. Social media or social network sites (SNSs), in the forms of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, and LinkedIn, are defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profiles within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). Most SNSs share structural similarities and may be fundamentally classified as community sites with profiles, friends, and comments (boyd, 2008). The online context of an SNS best resembles a community of connections, although it is based on an individual. That is, SNSs provide a means for one to focus on building one's own of social connections via online interaction. As such, SNSs encourage user participation which is primarily seen in the form of providing feedback, sharing information, and otherwise communicating through the web-based service. Therefore, social media improve the ways public relations practitioners communicate with organization's publics and are especially instrumental in building relationships with specific publics and enhancing involvement and engagement (2001). These unique features of social media make it more likely for organizations to generate social capital.

Many 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 and strategic communication affect citizens' social capital and civic engagement 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 and strategic communication in social capital and civic engagement 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 strategic communication efforts by social, civic, professional, and religious organizations and social capital and civic engagement. The focal independent variable, *strategic communication*, includes social, civic, professional, and religious organizations' use of print newsletters, face-to-face meetings, email, message boards, websites and blogs, and social media (Facebook or Twitter) to communicate with members. Dependent variables include social capital variable (*interpersonal trust*) and civic participation (*social engagement and private engagement*).

Literature Review

Public Relations Effort, Social Capital and Civic Engagement

Because public relations focuses on building and maintaining relationships between an organization and its publics, the social capital and civic engagement ideas provide a deeper meaning of relationships for the community and society at large as well as for the individuals and organizations. Public relations scholars have begun examining the role of public relations in social capital and citizenship behavior (e.g., Kennan & Hazleton, 2006; Luoma-aho, 2009; Zhang & Seltzer, 2010), but the social capital and civic engagement ideas have been applied to the field of public relations only moderately.

Previous studies include ones that focus on public relations role in building communities such as Kruckeberg and Starck's (1988) "community building theory" and Hallahan's (2004) notion of community as a foundation for public relations. They maintain that the crucial role of public relations practitioners is to foster a sense of community and make the community a better place.

Many applications of social capital in public relations produced a mixed bag of evidence for the benefits of social capital. Hazleton and Kennan (2000) examined the role of organizational social capital in an organization's bottomline such as reduced transaction costs, increased productivity, quality, and customer satisfaction. They investigated three dimensions of social capital that are instrumental for public relations: Structural dimension, communication dimension, and relational dimension. They argue that communication is not only the foundation of social capital but also the "mechanism whereby the available stock of social capital can be accessed and expended to further various organizational goals and objectives" (p. 83). 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.

Interpersonal Communication and Civic Engagement

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), has unique characteristics and 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. Hallahan proposed that 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.

In general, communication research investigates the mobilizing influence of both media communication and interpersonal communication on citizens' civic engagement (e.g., McLeod, Scheufele, Moy, Horowitz et al., 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Stamm, Emig, and Hesse (1997) maintained a key role of interpersonal discussion as "the primary mechanisms for community integration" (p. 106). McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy (1999) found that although interpersonal communication played a modest role in institutionalized participation (i.e., vote, contact a public official) it played the strongest role in generating heated discussions about local issues. In addition, McLeod, Scheufele, Moy, Horowitz et al. (1999) identified three types of effect of political and civic issue discussion: More frequent discussion of issues makes a person more likely to seek more information and pay attention to local news, to reflect on those issues and to participate in deliberative civic forums. 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.

Public Relations and Private Engagement

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 role most emphasized. Kent and Taylor (2002) explicated the concept of dialogue as being based on the acknowledgment of the diverse values of others, facilitation of participation and an emphasis on mutual benefit with like-minded individuals.

From a public relations organizational perspective, 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). Hazleton and Kennan (2000) state that social capital's relational dimension focuses on the nature and character of connections among individuals. And, it is the individual who decides to participate in civil society and forms associations through active participation. Sommerfeldt (2013) examined the role of relationships between civic society actors and community members in Peru and concluded that organizations pushing social capital must recognize that their relationships have a direct consequence on the ability for the community and the organization to benefit from the social capital acquired through the relationships. It is the civil society actors that must lead the charge in improving the relationship variables associated with social capital such as collaboration and information exchange (Sommerfeldt, 2013).

Two main components 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 social capital.

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 maintaining a connection is the most important activity associated with bridging and bonding social capital. Online communication is one way for organizations to facilitate the building and maintaining of relationships between individuals and like-minded others.

Influence of Online Media on Private Engagement

Although some scholars believe that relationships created online are not as meaningful as offline ones (Nie, 2001) and that the Internet causes higher rates of emotional and social loneliness (Aiken, Vanjani, Ray & Martin, 2003), it 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). Moreover, people utilize the Internet for exchange of information, ideas and opinions (Kennan et al, 2008) without time and space restrictions (Conroy, Feezell & Guerrero, 2012). By having access to more information, individuals have the ability to learn about activities that may spark self-interest that they did not know existed previously.

One major advantage of using the Internet is to advance personal 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). Drew and Weaver (2006) identified attention and exposure to political information online as positively related to campaign knowledge and interest. Tolbert and McNeal (2003) found access to the Internet positively associated with voting. Engagement in chat rooms also predicts higher voting rates (Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2008).

The Internet not only allows individuals to access information, but it also allows them to coordinate their actions to address issues with like-minded individuals (Shah, Cho, Eveland & Kwak, 2005). In their 2005 study, Shah et al. discovered that the majority of participants sought information online for civic engagement activities. And, it was discovered that a strong correlation, over time, between Internet use, information gathering, and political expression existed. This finding provides public relations practitioners with great insight into the power of the Internet. In order to mobilize and engage with individuals regarding civic activities, the Internet provides public relations practitioners, especially in the political realm, with the most efficient tool. Online tools like email provide individuals an avenue to share their views with many people simultaneously (Shah et al, 2005).

Similar to the Internet, SNSs have shown positive effects between use and increase in civic participation. SNSs 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). SNSs offer public relations 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: 1) Identity information and information disclosure on SNSs influence usages and outcomes (Burke, Marlow & Lento, 2010); 2). SNSs blend online and offline behavior for social action (Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2007); 3). Distinct social capital benefits associated with SNS use such as bonding and bridging social capital are evident (Ellison et al., 2007; Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe, 2010).

Most research examining SNSs influence on civic and political involvement involves Facebook and its various features (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 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. According to Park et al., (2009) Facebook Groups provide an emerging, yet powerful tool for drawing individuals to societal concerns and uniting like-minded people as active participants in society.

As mentioned previously, SNSs are great tools for bridging and bonding social capital. Ellison et al. (2007) found that there is a strong association between heavy Facebook use and an individual's bridging social capital. Facebook use helps individuals turn online contacts into real connections, often by reducing barriers that would normally exist in offline relationships (Ellison et al, 2007). Social network sites enable self-expression through the profiles created, which consist of numerous opportunities for individuals to share information with one's friendship networks, political affiliations, and other aspects of the self (Ellison et al, 2010). Therefore organizations, through public relations efforts can provide information for individuals to share with their social networks.

Overall, past research shows that SNSs are emerging, yet powerful tools for drawing attention to societal concerns and uniting individuals to become active participants (Park et al, 2009).

Public Relations and Social Engagement

In order to increase social capital and civic engagement, an individual may participate in activities for self-interest or do so for the greater good of his or her 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 involving and 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 social capital outside the organization. Through various campaigns focusing on community building, organizations can provide members an opportunity to address shared issues with the outside community (Jin & Lee, 2013). The role of public relations also includes the fostering and creation of communal values including alliances and partnerships with the local community (Jin & Lee, 2013). Specifically, through their 2013 study, Jin and Lee concluded that if people see that an organization uses public relations to tie its employees with local residents, their belief that community members can be empowered to address and resolve shared issues and problems with the organization are harbored. The authors suggest that organizations should implement various strategies such as sports, educational, cultural and volunteer programs for employees and their families, as well for local residents, to foster community capacity.

By bridging with the local community, organizations can improve its competitive advantage as well. Kennan and Hazleton (2006) approach social capital from an organizational-centric position believing that the benefits of social capital can help an organization become more competitive and successful.

For public relations to foster positive 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 (2009), fundraising for nongovernmental organizations, volunteering to help the needy, and participating in community service all encompass civic participation and social engagement. In recent years, Internet and SNS use has increased the visibility and capability of organizations and individuals alike to increase their social engagement. In fact, Valenzuela (2009) found that offline political and civic participation is associated to an individual's involvement with online political and civic groups.

Influence of Online Media on Social Engagement

Scholars have argued that information technology has caused a new social paradigm where social relationships are derived and cultivated online (Castells, 1989). Through the Internet, everyone has the capability to push news to their social groups, create advocacy groups, organize public gatherings, and connect with people around the world, without ever meeting face-to-face (Mandarano, Meenar & Steins, 2011).

The ability to use the Internet for mobilization and engagement is especially prevalent in politics. Citizen engagement is not simply created by the efforts of campaign staffers, but also by volunteers' willingness to connect with political organizations, which is more easily done through the Internet (Nielsen, 2010). One major concept that links political mobilization and social engagement is collective action. Collective action involves strategies and tactics that bring people together to affect political, social, and ideological change (Obar, et al., 2012). There have been numerous examples of advocacy and political groups utilizing the Internet to pursue collective action. Advocacy groups use the Internet to facilitate massive email writing campaigns and public comment submission to law makers (Obar et al., 2012). In fact, individuals who frequently use the Internet for information are more likely to become involved with offline clubs and use that information to demonstrate high levels of political knowledge (Pasek, More & Romer, 2008).

In addition to the Internet, SNSs provide an opportunity for individuals to socially engage with their community. Sites such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter provide organizations platforms to mobilize individuals to volunteer and fundraise for various causes (Nielson, 2010; Obar et al., 2012). Two great examples of SNSs being used to mobilize like-minded individuals for a specific cause are the 2011 "Occupy" movement and the "Arab Spring" movement in the Middle East. In both instances, social media platforms were adopted to organize protests and gatherings (Sommerfeldt, 2012).

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 social networking sites 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 (Putnam, 2000), these sites, in fact are providing an avenue for individuals to become socially engaged with their community.

This study seeks to identify which public relations efforts utilized by organizations influence interpersonal trust, social engagement and private engagement. Specifically, we focus on offline tactics including the distribution of print materials and conducting face-to-face meetings and online tactics including Internet and social media use. Based on the literature review above, the following research questions and hypotheses are proposed:

RQ1a: What is the relationship between an organization's distribution of a newsletter and interpersonal trust?

RQ1b: What is the relationship between an organization's distribution of a newsletter and social engagement?

RQ1c: What is the relationship between an organization's distribution of a newsletter and private engagement?

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 social engagement.

H1c: Organizations' face-to-face meetings will have a positive influence on private 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 social engagement.

H2c: Organizations' general Internet use will have a positive influence on private 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 social engagement.

H3c: Organizations' social media use will have a positive influence on private 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 social network sites in civic group formation and participation (Rainie et al. 2011). The fieldwork of this national representative telephone survey with the random-digit dialing techniques 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 offline civic engagement including *social engagement* and *private engagement*. Based on the adaptation from the work of Mascherini, Saltelli, and Vidoni (2007), offline civic participation was divided into *private engagement* and *social engagement*.

Private engagement was an additive measure of 17 items. Respondents were asked if they were "currently active in any of these types of groups or organizations, or not": sports or recreation leagues (25.1%), hobby groups or clubs (19.5%), professional or trade associations (23.3%), parent groups or organizations (13.4%), youth groups (10.1%), veterans groups or organizations (8.6%), consumer groups (26.8%), farm organizations (4.9%), travel clubs (6.2%), sports fantasy leagues (7.0%), gaming communities (5.0%), national or local organizations for older adults (20.5%), 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 17 items were combined to form the *private engagement* index.

Social engagement was an additive measure of 10 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%), performance or arts groups (12.2%), social or fraternal clubs, sororities or fraternities (9.7%), literacy, discussion or study groups (12.5%), charitable or volunteer organizations (25.4%), ethnic or cultural groups (5.5%), support groups for people with a particular illness or personal situation (19.1%), alumni associations (17.8%), and environmental groups (8.8%). Just as was done for *private engagement*, the scale was dummy coded (0 - *not active*, 1 - *active*) and the intensity of their active participation in those organizations was also dummy coded (0 - *no*, 1 - *yes*). Again, an individual's participation in each organization was the sum of one's participation in each organization combined with their participation levels. All 10 items were summed to form the *social engagement* index.

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*).

Independent variables included organizations' strategic communication efforts and demographic variables.

Organizations' strategic communication efforts included four variables: *sending out print newsletter* (47.8%), *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%). The two items were combined to form the index of *SNS use*.

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 moderate 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 answer the research questions and test hypotheses of this study to determine whether organizations' strategic communication efforts exerted significant influences on interpersonal trust and offline civic participation (social engagement and private engagement). Demographic variables were entered as the first

block, followed by the focal independent variables; organizations' strategic communication effort.

Results

RQ1a, RQ1b, and RQ1c examined the influence of organizations' sending out a newsletter on interpersonal trust, social engagement, and private engagement, respectively. According to Table 1, after controlling for influences of demographic variables, organizations' sending out a newsletter to their members did not produce any significant impact on members' interpersonal trust, social or private engagement.

H1a, H1b, and H1c predicted that organizations' face-to-face meetings with their members would have positive impact on interpersonal trust, social engagement, and private engagement. 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 ($\beta = .06, p < .05$), on social engagement ($\beta = .31, p < .001$), and private engagement ($\beta = .31, p < .001$). Therefore, H1a, H1b, and H1c were all supported.

H2a, H2b, and H2c predicted that organizations' general Internet use would have a positive effect on interpersonal trust, social engagement and private engagement, respectively, 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 and private engagement, therefore, H2a and H2c were not supported. Organizations' general Internet use had a negative influence on social engagement ($\beta = -.07, p < .05$), the opposite of H2b predicted, so H2b was not supported.

H3a, H3b, and H3c predicted the positive impact of organizations' strategic social media use on interpersonal trust, social engagement, and private engagement. As seen from Table 1, organizations' social media use did not have a significant positive influence on interpersonal trust, so H3a was not supported. As predicted, organizations' social media use did exert positive influence on social-oriented participation ($\beta = .05, p < .05$) and private-oriented participation ($\beta = .05, p < .05$). Therefore, H3b and H3c were supported.

Concerning the influence of demographic variables on interpersonal trust, social and private engagement, older people tended to trust others in general ($\beta = .07, p < .01$) but age was not a significant factor in social-oriented or private-oriented participation. Females tended to trust people in general less ($\beta = -.06, p < .01$) but gender did not make a difference in people's social or private engagement. Educated individuals were more likely to trust people in general ($\beta = .14, p < .001$), engage in social-oriented participation ($\beta = .10, p < .001$) and private-oriented participation ($\beta = .09, p < .001$). Wealthy individuals trusted people in general more ($\beta = .14, p < .001$) and were more active in social engagement ($\beta = .08, p < .001$) and private engagement ($\beta = .08, p < .001$). Caucasians were more likely to trust people in general ($\beta = .10, p < .001$) but less likely to participate in social-oriented engagement ($\beta = -.06, p < .01$) and private-oriented engagement ($\beta = -.04, p < .05$). In a similar fashion, liberals were more likely to trust other people ($\beta = .05, p < .05$) but less likely to participate in social-oriented engagement ($\beta = -.06, p < .01$) and private-oriented engagement ($\beta = -.07, p < .01$).

Discussion

The public relations discipline is closely related to the society at large, but the crucial macro-social 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 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 and strategic communication 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) 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.

This study provides initial empirical evidence for the important role of public relations and strategic communication endeavor, in particular the strategic social media use and interpersonal communication, in fostering civic engagement. Overall, organizations' strategic social media use boosts both social-oriented and private-oriented civic engagement, confirming the results from the limited empirical work in this area (Park et al., 2009; Valenzuela, 2009; Obar et al., 2012). This finding points to great potential for social media as a mobilizing tool for organizations in revitalizing democratic governance and societal functioning. In addition, organizations' regular face-to-face meetings with their members enhance interpersonal trust and stimulate both social-oriented and private-oriented engagement in civic affairs, which is in keeping with findings from previous studies (Zhang & Seltzer, 2010; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; McLeod, Scheufele, Moy, Horowitz et al., 1999). Findings for the role of interpersonal communication or discussion are positively consistent. That is, the size and heterogeneity of discussion networks and frequency of interpersonal discussion exert positive influence on civic participation and political participation.

The analysis also indicates the limitations of public relations effort in stimulating social capital and civic engagement. For instance, sending out print newsletters does not make any difference in enhancing interpersonal trust or civic engagement, nor does general Internet use. 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 be organization-driven and lacks meta-level theorizing. Social capital theory allows the field to focus on the larger societal benefits accompanied by healthy social relations and social connectedness. 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.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the major limitations of this study lies in the inherent disadvantage of doing secondary analysis of an existing dataset though Pew Research Center's 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 strategic communication such as traditional, and Internet and social media usage are measured through the use of simple "yes" or "no" questions. Future research could use interval level measurements to gain more accurate estimates. Because the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project only examines Internet's impact on political and civic life, future research should also investigate the effects of the nature of social media use on offline participation 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 strategic communication on social capital creation. This study only examines generalized interpersonal trust as one of the dependent variables. Future research should expand the outcomes of organizations' strategic communication efforts such as institutional trust and particularized trust, and other forms of organizational outcomes. Future studies can also explore the influence of strategic communication 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 very harmful to those outside the groups (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 in the social capital and civic engagement processes.

The significant findings of the importance of social media 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 and civic engagement (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. Finally, future research should examine the contingent conditions or moderators for social capital and civic engagement in the public relations context.

References

- Aiken, M., Vanjani, M., Ray, B., & Martin, J. (2003). College student Internet use. *Campus-Wide Information Systems*, 20, 182-185.
- Bennett, W. (2003). Communicating global activism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 6(2), 143-168.
- Best, S., & Krueger, B. (2006). Online interactions and social capital distinguishing between new and existing ties. *Social Science Computer Review*, 24(4), 395-410.
- Bode, L. (2012). Facebooking it to the polls: A study in online social networking and political behavior. *Journal of Information, Technology & Politics*, 9, 352-369.
- Bourdieu, P. (2001). The forms of capital. In Granovetter, M. & Swedberg, R. (eds.), *The sociology of economic life* (2nd ed.) (pp. 96-111). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- boyd, d. (2008). Digital handshakes in networked publics: Why politicians must interact, not broadcast. In B. Rigby (Ed.), *Mobilizing generation 2.0*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- boyd, d. & Ellison, N. B. (2008). Social network sites: Definitions, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13, 210-230.
- Burke, M., Marlow, C., and Lento, T. (2010). Social network activity and social well-being. *ACM CHI 2010: Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1909-1912.
- Castells, M. (1989). *The informational city: Information technology, economic restructuring and the urban-regional process*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.
- Conroy, M., Feezell, J., & Guerrero, M. (2012). Facebook and political engagement: A study of online political group membership and offline political engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(5), 1535-1546.
- Drew, D., & Weaver, D. (2006). Voter learning in the 2004 presidential election: Did the media matter? *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83, 25-42.
- Ehrlich, T. (2000). *Civic responsibility and higher education*. Westport, CT: Oryx Press.
- Ellison, N., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), 1143-1168. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x.
- Ellison, N., Steinfield, C. and Lampe, C. (2010, May). *Connection strategies: Relationship information and maintenance on social network sites*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Chicago, IL.
- Hallahan, K. (2001). Strategic media planning: Toward an integrated public relations media model. In R.L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 461-470). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hallahan, K. (2004). "Community" as a foundation for public relations theory and practice. *Communication Yearbook*, 28(1), 233-279.
- Hampton, K., & Wellman, B. (2002). The not so global village of Netville. In B. Wellman, & C. Haythornthwaite (eds), *The Internet in everyday life* (pp. 345-371). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hazleton, V., & Kennan, W. (2000). Social capital: Reconceptualizing the bottom line. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 5(2), 81-87.
- Jin, B., & Lee, S. (2013). Enhancing community capacity: Roles of perceived bonding and bridging social capital and public relations in community building. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 290-292. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.08.009.
- Kennan, W., & Hazleton, V. (2006). Internal public relations, social capital, and the role of effective organizational communication. In C. H. Botan & V. Hazelton (Eds.), *Public relations theory II* (pp. 311-338). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Kennan, W., Hazleton, V., Janoske, M., & Short, M. (2008). The influence of new communication technologies on undergraduate preferences for social capital formation, maintenance, and expenditure. *Public Relations Journal*, 2(2), 1-21.
- Kent, M. (2013). Using social media dialogically: Public relations role in reviving democracy. *Public Relations Review*, 39(4), 337-345.
doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.07.024.
- Kent, M. & Taylor, M. (2002). Toward a dialogic theory of public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 28, 21-37.
- Kruckeberg, D., & Starck, K. (1988). *Public relations and community: A reconstructed theory*. New York: Praeger.
- Leeper, K. (1986). Public relations: Ethics and communitarianism. *Public Relations Review*, 22, 163-179.
- Leeper, R. (2000). In search of a meta theory of public relations: An argument for communitarianism. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of public relations* (pp. 93-104). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lin, N. (2001). Building a network theory of social capital. In Lin, N., Cook, K., & Burt, R. (Eds.), *Social capital theory and research* (pp. 3-30). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Luoma-aho, V. (2005). *Faith-holders as social capital of Finnish public organizations*. Jyväskylä, Finland: University of Jyväskylä Press.
- Luoma-aho, V. (2006). Intangibles of public organizations: Trust and reputation. In V. Luoma-aho & S. Peltola (Eds.), *public organizations in the communication society* (pp. 11-58). Jyväskylä, Finland: University of Jyväskylä Press.
- Luoma-aho, V. (2009). On Putnam: Bowling together-applying Putnam's theories of community and social capital to public relations. In O. Ihlen, M. van Ruler, & M. Fredriksson (Eds.), *Public relations and social theory: Key figures and concepts* (pp. 231-251). New York: Routledge.
- Mandarano, L., Meenar, M., & Steins, C. (2010). Building social capital in the digital age of civic engagement. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 25, 123-135.
- Mascherini, M., Saltelli, A., & Vidoni, D. (2007). *Participation in Europe: one-size-fits-none*. Institute for the Protection and Security of the Citizen (European Commission, Directorate-General Joint Research Centre, Institute for the Protection and Security of the Citizen) Luxembourg. Retrieved September, 3, 2007.
- McLeod, J. M., Scheufele, D. A., & Moy, P. (1999). Community, communication and participation: The role of mass media and interpersonal discussion in local political participation. *Political Communication*, 16, 315-336.
- McLeod, J. M., Scheufele, D. A., Moy, P., Horowitz, E. M., Holbert, R. L., Zhang, W., Zubric, S., & Zubric, J. (1999). Understanding deliberation: The effects of discussion networks on participation in a public forum. *Communication Research*, 26, 743-774.
- Mossberger, K., Tolbert, C., & McNeal, R. (2008). *Digital citizenship: The Internet, society, and participation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Nie, N. (2001). Sociability, interpersonal relations, and the internet reconciling conflicting findings. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(3), 420-435.
- Nielsen, R. (2011). Mundane Internet tools, mobilizing practices, and the coproduction of citizenship in political campaigns. *New Media & Society*, 13(5), 755-771.
doi:10.1177/1461444810380863.
- Obar, J., Zube, P., & Lampe, C. (2012). Advocacy 2.0: An analysis of how advocacy groups in the United States perceived and use social media as tools for facilitating civil engagement and collection action. *Journal of Information Policy*, 2, 1-25.

- Park, N., Kee, K., & Valenzuela, S. (2009). Being immersed in social networking environment: Facebook groups, uses and gratifications, and social outcomes. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 12(6), 729-733.
- Pasek, J., More, E., & Romer, D. (2008). Realizing the social internet? Online social networking meets offline social capital. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 6(3-4), 197-215.
- Patrick, J. (1998). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Chicago: ACTA Publications.
- Putnam, R. (1995a). Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 65-78.
- Putnam R. (1995b) Tuning in, tuning out: The strange disappearance of social capital in America. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 28(4), 664-683.
- Putnam, R. (2000a). Social capital: Measurement and consequences. *Canadian Journal of Policy Research*, 2(1), 41-51.
- Putnam, R. (2000b). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Rainie, L., Purcell, K. & Smith, A. (2011). The social site of the internet. *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Social-Side-of-the-Internet.aspx>.
- Shah, D., Cho, J., Eveland, W., & Kwak, N. (2005). Information and expression in a digital age modeling Internet effects on civic participation. *Communication Research*, 32(5), 531-565. doi:10.1177/0093650205279209.
- Sommerfeldt, E. (2012). Networks of social capital: Extending a public relations model of civil society in Peru. *Public Relations Review*, 39, 1-12. doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.08.005.
- Sommerfeldt, E. (2013). The civility of social capital: Public relations in the public sphere, civil society, and democracy. *Public Relations Review*, 39 (4), 280-289. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.12.004.
- Sommerfeldt, E. J., & Taylor, M. (2011). A social capital approach to improving public relations' efficacy: Diagnosing internal constraints on external communication. *Public Relations Review*, 37(3), 197-206.
- Stamm, K. R., Emig, A.G., & Hesse, M.B. (1997). The contribution of local media to community involvement. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74, 97-107.
- Steinfeld, C., Ellison, N. & Lampe, C. (2008). Social capital, self-esteem, and use of online social network sites: a longitudinal analysis. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 29, 434-445.
- Steinfeld, C., Ellison, N., Lampe, C. & Vitak, J. (2012). Online social network sites and the concept of social capital. In F. Lee, L. Leung, J. Qui, & S. Chu (eds.), *Frontiers in new media research* (pp.115-131). New York: Routledge.
- Taylor, M. (2009). Civil society as a rhetorical public relations process. In R. Heath, E.L. Toth, & D. Waymer (Eds.), *Rhetorical and critical approaches to public relations II* (pp. 76-91). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Taylor, M. (2010). Public relations in the enactment of civil society. In R. Heath (Ed.), *The SAGE handbook of public relations* (pp. 5-15). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Taylor, M. (2011). Building social capital through rhetoric and public relations. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 25, 436-454. doi:10.1177/0893318911410286.
- Taylor, M., & Doerfel, M. (2003). Building interorganizational relationships that build nations. *Human Communication Research*, 29(2), 153-181.

- Taylor, M., & Kent, M. (2000). Media transitions in Bosnia: From propagandist past to uncertain future. *Gazette*, 62, 355–378.
- Tolbert, C. & McNeal, R. (2003). Unraveling the effects of the Internet on political participation? *Political Research Quarterly*, 56, 175–185.
- Wellman, B., Hasse, A., Witte, J., & Hampton, K. (2001). Does the Internet increase, decrease, or supplement social capital? Social networks, participation, and community commitment. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(3), 436-459.
- Willis, P. (2012). Engaging communities: Ostrom's economic commons, social capital and public relations. *Public Relations Review*, 38(1), 116-122. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev/2011.08.016.
- Wimmer, R.D., & Dominick, J. R. (2006). *Mass media research: An introduction* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Learning.
- Valenzuela S, Park N, Kee K. (2008, April) *Lessons from Facebook: The effect of social network sites on college students' social capital*. Paper presented at the 9th International Symposium on Online Journalism, Austin, TX.
- Vitak, J., Zube, P, Smock, A., Carr., Ellison, N., & Lampe, C. (2011). It's complicated : Facebook users' political participation in the 2008 election. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 14(3). 107-114.
- Zhang, W., & Seltzer, T. (2010). Another piece of the puzzle: Advancing social capital theory by examining the effect of political party relationship quality on political and civic participation. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 4(3), 155-170. doi:10.1080/15531180903415954.
- Zuniga, H., Nakwon, J., & Valenzuela S. (2011). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3). 319-336. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01574.x.

Table 1
Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Interpersonal Trust, Social Engagement and Private Engagement

Independent Variables	Interpersonal Trust	Social Engagement	Private Engagement
Demographics			
Age	.07**	.03	.02
Gender (female coded higher)	-.06**	.03	.01
Education	.14***	.10***	.09***
Income	.14***	.08***	.08***
Race (Caucasian coded higher)	.10***	-.06**	-.04*
Ideology (liberal coded higher)	.05*	-.06**	-.07**
R² (%)	9.1***	5.8***	5.5***
Strategic Comm Variables			
Send out print newsletter	.00	-.03	-.04
Hold regular in-person meetings	.06*	.31***	.31***
General Internet use	-.01	-.07*	-.06
Social media use	.01	.05*	.05*
Incremental R² (%)	.3 n.s.	7.5***	7.3***
Total R² (%)	9.4***	13.3***	12.8***

Note. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients. * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$