IMAGE IS EVERYTHING: INFORMATION-SEEKING OF COLLEGE STUDENTS AND

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS

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Effectiveness of Public Relations Efforts

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ABSTRACT

Organizations are continually searching for the most effective ways to distribute information and gain referrals from consumers. This study sought to find out how consumers seek information about an organization and how this impacts their views on the organization and advocacy intentions. The findings from this research conclude that views on the organization were positively impacted by individuals who identified as passive information seekers, more so than the active information-seekers. Passive information-seeking also had a higher association with advocacy than the, still positively associated, active information-seekers. Moreover, the results indicated that the most effective public relationship indicator on advocacy was that of personal commitment and anthropomorphism. Therefore, concluding that organizations would be best served by appealing passively on social media to individuals about the humanistic qualities and level of personal commitment their organization has shown to customers.

Keywords: Organizational, Communication, Public Relations, Social Media, Information-Seeking

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INTRODUCTION

When universities are accepting students, they of course, want to make sure they are recruiting the students that they truly want to attend their institution. Post-secondary institutions are increasing the amounts they spend on social media and their efforts on those platforms (Vasquez, 2017). These universities are trying to find the best practices to guide their public relations strategies in order to build and maintain the relationships they desire with their students (Wisely & Jorgenson, 2000). On the other side of that relationship students are seeking out information on the institutions they are thinking of attending (Wisely & Jorgenson, 2000).

Present research relating information-seeking to public relations efforts and the effect on advocacy has shown that universities have increased social media efforts to target potential students and created advertisement campaigns specifically for recruitment to draw them to the university website (Wisely & Jorgenson, 2000). Universities are fighting for their students and spending increasing amounts of money on the tools they use to recruit, specifically, social media campaigns (Vasquez, 2017). Vasquez (2017) states that universities are using student admission application information for Custom Targeting Advertisements via social media.

The thought process from this point can lead practitioners down a slippery slope of how to best approach their audience and manage the image of the organization. A continual debate of the public relations best practices has been discussed in a vast collection of offices, conferences and online forums. A quick internet search has dozens of articles claiming that they have the "Top PR Trends for 2017," courtesy of Crenshaw Communications (2017), and this is one of many. However, within the articles the common trend is more of a definition of public relations rather than suggestions for how businesses can change their behaviors. The following research

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breaks down just that, how an organization is perceived and what are the most successful ways to enhance the public relationship and increase advocacy.

Post-secondary institutions are increasing their efforts to engage with the incoming student population, creating hashtags and maintaining or redoing their website (Wisely & Jorgenson, 2000). They do their best to get information out and manage the impressions they make with potential educational consumers (Wisely & Jorgenson, 2000). Impression management is a key component of recruitment, in a broad sense.

Research in public relations links the basics facets of interpersonal relationship communication theory with organization-public relationship research (Coombs, 2001; Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison & Lesko, 1997; Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010). Bruning and Ledingham (1999) suggest that organization-public relationships are multi-dimensional. Further research indicates the development of phases within those relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 2002) and that the relationships will function in a different way than personal relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998). Relationship management has been applied in the study of community (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000) and business to business (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000a) relations. Relationships will remain the center of public relations (Coombs, 2001). Models that are based within interpersonal communication are an excellent resource for the understanding, predication and management of organization and stakeholder relationships (Coombs, 2001). An organization provides its consumers with information via social media and other outlets, the audience absorbs this information and makes choices based off it; which is in short, the organization's reputation (Coombs, 2001).

This study seeks to understand how passive and active information-seeking through social media impacts public perception of an organization. Passive information seeking can be

defined as an individual receiving information without requesting it (Huotari & Wilson, 2001). Whereas, active information-seeking can be defined as the pull of information or request for it to be provided (Allen & Wilson, 2003; Edmunds & Morris, 2000). It will go on to study the effect on the willingness of individuals to recommend the organization based on the organizations' public relationship efforts. Organizations, regardless of their industry, are using social media to create relationships with their consumers (Kelleher & Miller 2009; Smith, 2010). The following study's purpose is to assist institutions in finding the best avenues to reach their desired audiences and how to distribute information. Depending on the audience the best practices may be to continually push information to a passive audience, or to find ways to engage with an audience actively searching for information. The implications of this study are to advise organizations based on how their consumers are seeking information and the effects of the information that is disseminated on public perception and the consumers' willingness to recommend that organization to another individual. This study answers these questions of organizations through the lens of a university of higher education's organizational-public relationship with its students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is widely known that public relations is about building and maintaining a relationship between an organization and its stakeholders (Broom et. al., 1997). The approach of relationship-building within the field of public relations has demanded that scholars rethink the roles, expectations, and needs of stakeholders and members of the community in which the organization is embedded (Broom et. al., 1997; Bruning & Lambe, 2008). Public relations is a key component of impression management and organizational communication (Broom et. al., 1997; Bruning & Lambe, 2008). Organizations use these tools to manage stakeholder views and help to determine the way information will be disseminated. The public relations' indicators of anthropomorphism, professional benefit/expectation, personal commitment, community involvement and the comparison of alternatives (Bruning and Galloway, 2003) must be singular in definition and understood for the purpose of this research. The public relations indicators overall measure the quality of the relationship between stakeholders (consumers/customers) and the organization but can be examined individually as well. Their significance can determine where the organization should be increasing their efforts or where they are failing and should change tactics. Therefore, the following definitions will be used as defined by Bruning and Galloway (2003).

When individuals assign human-like qualities to a non-human entity the concept is defined as *anthropomorphic* (Bruning & Galloway, 2003). Bruning and Galloway (2003, pg. 315) define the indicator of *professional benefit and expectations* as whether or not respondents will expect the organizations to "engage in actions that are responsible and provide benefit to the public[s]" that they serve and the expectations of what the organization should be doing compared to what the organization actually does. *Personal commitment* is key, as it can be

defined as individual's desire to maintain a long and consistent relationship (Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Li-Ting, Tsung-Chieh & Cheng-Kiang, 2007; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). *Community improvement* can be defined as the business not only having a relationship within the community but improving it according to respondents (Bruning & Galloway, 2003). *Comparison of alternatives* can be defined as the ability of the current post-secondary education provider fulfilling the needs of the participant compared to how they feel about other alternatives (Bruning & Galloway, 2003).

The public relationship indicators are an important facet of managing what the consumer sees and perceives as appropriate behaviors for the organization. Consumers often make these judgements based on the public relations efforts of an organization (Coombs, 2001). The organization uses its public relations strategy to determine what information is distributed to consumers, managing their impressions by putting their best foot forward and highlighting their positive traits. The consumers then absorb this information and form opinions on the organization based on what they read, see, or hear, most of which stems from the information the organization's public relations strategists selected to be released (Coombs, 2001; Turnley & Bolino, 2001).

Impression Management

Pertinent to public relations and the way that the public views an organization, it is critical to discuss the theory of impression management. People care about how others view them and the opinions that others form about them; this stands true for organizations as well (Bolino, Long & Turnley, 2016; Leary, 1995; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Self-presentation is critical to organizational success and survival. It is in an organization's best interest to be liked and perceived as an organization that will do their best by their stakeholders. Impression

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management is an important component of public relationships because it can have broad implications for both the individuals and the larger organization to which they belong (Bolino, Long & Turnley, 2016; Bolino et al., 2008). Often the study of impression management focuses on the specifics of the theory, ingratiation, self-promotion, or the use of it in a narrow scenario (e.g., Gordon, 1996; Ellis et al., 2002).

Impression management has been somewhat varied among scholars, but for the purposes of this study it can be considered an attempt to create a new or ideal outward image of an organization (Bruning & Lambe, 2008). The theory of impression management stems from the work of Goffman (1959) who reasoned that individuals can manage their expressions to influence how others will respond to those expressions. This process has been seen in social media, and the perception that others have of an individual is based not on interactions but on the shared expressions (Fieseler & Ranzini, 2015). The process can be a conscious and strategic choice, or a subconscious side-effect of other choices (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Impression management can be defined as the attempt to control the impression that others formulate about an individual or organization (Rosenfeld, Giacalone & Riordan, 1995).

Occasionally, the process receives a negative connotation since it can be seen as manipulative or that the organization is creating a false visage for their stakeholders (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosenfield, 1997). Jones and Pittman (1982) have defined five tactics of impression management: ingratiation (to be seen as likeable), self-promotion (taking credit to be seen as capable and competent), exemplification (looking busy to be viewed as dedicated) intimidation (menacing), and supplication (to appear needed). However, if there is already an established view of competence, liking and dedication it would be more likely to be perceived as natural and beneficial behavior using ingratiation and self-promotion as impression management

tactics (Turnley & Bolino, 2001). When using each of these, caution must be taken to not come on too strong to avoid appearing self-righteous.

Research in impression management affirms the idea that individuals will craft what they believe is the desired image for the role they are taking on (Turnley & Bolino, 2001). It is critical that those looking to utilize impression management play to their strengths and highlight what traits they naturally possess to avoid being seen as fake (Bolino, Long & Turnley, 2016; Leary, 1995). This is imperative since the impressions stakeholders form about an organization can lead directly to their development of corporate image (Spear, 2017).

Studies have shown that companies will often implement impression management practices to manage the stakeholder perception of the organization as well as the evaluations of the organization (Mishina, Block & Mannor, 2012). Spear and Roper (2013) found that there were links between the story elements of corporate impression management behaviors and the indication of the story influence on audiences, indicating that stories can influence audiences and build the corporate reputation.

Corporations cannot control their reputation directly. Impression management is critical to building the desired positive image, which over time can become the corporate reputation (Abratt, 1989; Ingenhoff & Fuhrer, 2010; Cornelissen, Christensen & Kinuthia, 2012; Iglesias & Bonet, 2012; Otubanjo, 2012 Spear, 2017). Corporate reputation has been defined as: "a stakeholder's overall evaluation of an organization over time" (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). The corporation is typically seen as responsible for maintaining their public image and ensuring they are behaving in way that would provide a positive image.

The perception of an institution's goods or services is critical when evaluating the overall effect of the organization on consumers and in the end its vitality within the community

(Büyükdoğan *et al*., 2017). Meaning, it is imperative to continually monitor the public relationship of an organization within the public it serves (Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Büyükdoğan *et al*., 2017). The information the company or organization selects is released to the public, and the viewers shape their opinions off those messages (Bruning & Galloway, 2003).

Social Media

Social media is a tool that can be used to create a connection with organizational stakeholders. Organizations use it as a form of impression management (Wagner, 2017). They control what is posted and what/who they are connected to publicly. It also provides a way to rapidly respond to situations where the organization's image is not presented in a positive light (Wagner, 2017). Social media is altering the way that companies conduct business and how they are perceived and interact with their consumers (Pew Research Center, 2017). Organizations are increasingly using social media as an approach to enhance their public relationship with their consumers (Pew Research Center, 2017). Even within the past decade, a survey of 399 U.S. and European businesses indicated that 88.2 percent of those polled had begun to undertake social media initiatives, and nearly half of those businesses had fully integrated a social media campaign into their communication strategy (eMarketer, 2015; Insights Consulting, 2011). In the United States alone, social media presence among adults has increased from 24 to 81 percent from 2008 to 2017 (Statista, 2017; Von Muehlan & Ohno-Machado, 2012; Bernhardt & Alber, 2014; Ventola, 2014). Newer communication technologies have increased the possibilities for how people seek out and obtain information (Fergie, Hilton & Hunt, 2016; Westerman, Spence & Heide, 2013). People use social media to gather information, share their stories, express concerns and obtain understanding of situations (Fergie et al., 2016; Fox, 2011). The newer

forms of social media provide the time-stamping feature and allow users to see whether or not information is current and can therefore be trusted (Westerman et al., 2013).

Social media has the potential to be a great benefit to organizations if used effectively. Most often we see it used for the spread of information, offering educational resources for current product uses, to hasten the process at which the information is delivered to the public in emergencies situations, to encourage community action, conduct research and to observe public perception of current issues (Chew & Eysenbach, 2009; Frost & Massagli, 2008; Merchant, Elmer & Lurie, 2011; Thackeray & Hunter, 2010; Sutton, 2010; Vance et al., 2009). Presently over 67 percent of Americans use social media to hear about businesses and self-reported using it as a source of information (Wagner, 2017). It provides an opportunity to facilitate engagement with community members and decrease uncertainty about current topics (Li & Bernhoff, 2008; Safko & Brake, 2009). Studies have shown that organizations are not capitalizing on the social media's full potential (Thackery et al., 2012, Wylie et al., 2016).

Passive Information-Seeking and Active Information-Seeking. Information-seeking has been studied by communication scholars dating back to the 1940s as studied by Krikelas (1983). Passive information-seeking has been defined as an individual receiving information without previously requesting it (Huotari & Wilson, 2001). With this type of information-seeking the sender runs the risk of overloading the receiver, since there was no request for information therefore no limitations on the amount being sent or its relevance to the receiver (Edmunds & Morris, 2000). Active information-seeking sits on the other side of the spectrum, being defined as; the pull of information or request for it to be provided (Allen & Wilson, 2003; Edmunds & Morris, 2000). Information-seeking is how searching and sharing, encompass the attitudes and collective behaviors of the information seekers (Kim & Grunig, 2011; Kim & Ni, 2013;

McKeever, 2013). Social media has been traditionally used as a source of information to be actively pursued, individuals searching for the information and actively *pulling* it when required, however it has pivoted to become a source for information to be *pushed* towards users in a passive fashion (Allen & Wilson, 2003; Edmunds & Morris, 2000).

Information-Seeking Through Social Media

Information-seeking is referred to as "planned scanning of the environment for messages about a specified topic," (Grunig, 1997, pg. 9). Social media has become increasingly popular as a source of information for the millennial generation, (Duggan & Brenner, 2013; Lenhart et al., 2010) specifically individuals entering college and seeking out information on post-secondary institutions. Individuals seeking information about specific topics are most commonly driven by a goal and use all manners of systems when searching for answers (Wilson, 2000).

Studies of social networking sites have shown that 89 percent of online users of social networking sites are between the ages of 18 and 29 (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Individuals are increasingly using social networks as sources of information and news (Smith, Rainie & Zickhur, 2011; Kim, Sin & Tsai, 2014). Information-seeking is used to understand how individuals find information, including how students search for information on their choices for higher education (Krikelas, 1983).

Student 'shop' for colleges through a process of information-seeking on social media to aid their decision making (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). The product is their education, they need to find out what exactly they are paying for and if it is worth what they will be spending (Wisely & Jorgenson, 2000). Social media is a significant driver of sales and is used as a way to engage with the consumer (eMarketer, 2015; Ogilvy & Mather 2011). When consumers are searching for a particular good or service to spend their money on they turn to information-

seeking tactics. Most recently those tactics have been used and via social media (Palmatier et al., 2007). These consumers will use social media to determine the relationship they want with a business, and the strength of that relationship (Palmatier et al., 2007).

As businesses work to create relationships on social media, it is critical to their success to determine the most profitable avenues that their public relations strategists should pursue. Active and passive information-seeking will both have an impact on the overall relationship between the consumer and organization (Clayman, Roter, Wissow & Bandeen-Roche, 2005). This study seeks to understand which information-seeking behavior will have a greater impact on the public relationship. The results will assist organization's public relations strategists in creating campaigns that will generate the greatest results in positively influencing the overall relationship (using the scale as one indicator) between consumers and the organization. The resulting research question examines the relationship as a whole, therefore demanding the testing of the Expanded Organizational–Public Relationship Scale (Bruning & Galloway, 2003) as a single variable; in this case, looking at the relationship between students and the university they attend.

University students use social media most commonly, for social interaction and information-seeking (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). For higher education institutions the building of relationship between the institution and its students is positively related to long-term loyalty and the overall relationship (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001). In the last decade universities are beginning to shed the aversion to marketing strategies, the thoughts that it would undermine student quality are slowly being put out of the minds of university public relations strategists (Anderson, 2008). With the implementation of government deregulation and an increase in competition universities are realizing that they must market themselves successfully

to compete in national and global markets for higher education (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Jongbloed, 2003; Maringe, 2006).

This poses the thought: do students use social media to find information about their potential colleges or are they simply observers of the information that colleges put out, and how does the type of information-seeking impact the public relationship?

> *RQ1: How will passive vs. active information-seeking about a university by its students on social media impact the overall public relations score (indicated by: anthropomorphism, professional benefit/expectation, personal commitment, community improvement and comparison of alternatives)?*

Advocacy

Advocacy within the realm of organizational public relations relates to how the organization is perceived as being socially responsible and the effect that has on consumer behavior, specifically their willingness to recommend the organization to another person. Social media provides the masses with the opportunity to express themselves and directly link it back to an organization (Smith, Men & Al-Sinan, 2014; Ozdemir, 2012). The knowledge that their opinions can have an effect drives their willingness to express themselves, in all capacities, good and bad (Smith, Men & Al-Sinan, 2014; Ozdemir, 2012). The end goal of an organization, retaining and increasing their consumers, depends on their impression management (Mishina, Block & Mannor, 2012) and consumers' information-seeking habits (Palmatier et al., 2007).

Advocacy is a critical and measurable effect of a quality public relations campaign, stemming from the organization's connection to stakeholders and their willingness to say or spread positive things about that organization (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Cho, Schweickart & Haase, 2014; DiStaso, McCorkindale, & Wright, 2011; Men & Tsai, 2012;

Ozdemir, 2012; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013). Social media is the new word of mouth for spreading information between individuals (Hearst, 2018, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013). There is a large audience of individuals and the content author is likely to spread the information since they know they will be heard (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Smith, Men & Al-Sinan, 2014; Ozdemir, 2012; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013), but the question remains of how an organization might influence what that individual might say. Organizations use public relations strategies to engage with their consumers (Bruning & Lambe, 2008), those strategies determine how they will manage the impression they are sending out (Mishina, Block & Mannor, 2012), the reception of that message will then influence the willingness of the reader to recommend that organization (Smith, Men & Al-Sinan, 2014; Ozdemir, 2012).

In short, will someone working towards a degree at a university, continue to do so and recommend someone else to attend as well. People want to help organizations with whom they feel a strong attachment (Fullerton, 2005). Research has shown a positive effect on commitment to consumer willingness to act as a reference for an organization (Fullerton, 2003; Harrison-Walker, 2001).

Since the industry of public relations is ever-changing along-side technology so are the best practices for the practitioners. Therein posing the thought of; what is the indicator that will be the best predictor of an individual's willingness to recommend an institution to others. As public relations strategists attempt to craft messages to their consumer audience, a campaign that creates messages that draws viewer focus back to a core value, item, or concept typically generate better results (Hearst, 2018).

As a university relationship marketing best fits their need to maintain relationships with current students and recruit new students as well (Helgesen, 2008; Klassen, 2002). For higher

education institutions relationship marketing involves building strong relationships between the university, current students, and future students, with the quality of these relationships being positively related to overall customer loyalty (McAlexander & Koenig, 2001).

This begs the question of what should that campaign focus on, or what aspect of public relations will generate the highest impact on consumers. The public relationship indicators were separated to be tested individually, to find which indicator would have the highest impact on the consumer's willingness to recommend, determining which areas would be best for practitioners to focus their efforts. This therefore leads to the following research question of how the public relationship indicators affect the advocacy of student-educational-consumers:

RQ₂: Which of the public relationship indicators including: anthropomorphism,

professional benefit/expectation, personal commitment, community improvement

and comparison of alternatives (scores) best predicts the participants' willingness

to recommend their university as a source of higher education?

The final query is that of the information-seeking style's effect on advocacy. How does an individual find the information? Additionally, are they simply absorbing it passively, or searching for it and actively pursuing the information about the institution, and that behavior's impact of their willingness to recommend the organization?

Research has demonstrated that more active information-seeking provides results in individuals that are more satisfied with the services they received compared to their passive information-seeking counterparts (Politi & Street, 2011; Roter & Hall, 2011). Similar research has shown that individuals who are active participants in information-seeking are more likely to advocate, and make recommendations in favor of an organization, decreasing apprehension about an organization (Clayman, et al., 2005; Venetis, Robinson, & Kearney, 2013). Individuals

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who seek information in a passive way, are more likely to behave the same way regarding advocacy, they will provide information if prompted, but generally, will not advocate without being asked (Pálsdóttir, 2008). When individuals are engaged on social media platforms with an organization and are willing to seek out more information, they build a relationship faster and of a higher quality than individuals who are disengaged with the content (Lee & Kwak, 2012). When the relationship is of a high quality then individuals are more likely to advocate for an organization (Fan & Gordon, 2014). This shows that individuals who are engaged with posts on social media are more likely talk about an organization (Fan & Gordon, 2014). Engagement has been positively related to the recollection of information at a later time (Junco, Heiberger, & Loken, 2011). Thus, justifying the following hypotheses related to information-seeking and advocacy:

> H_{1A}: *Active information-seeking is positively associated with advocacy.*
>
> H_{1B}: *Passive information-seeking will be negatively associated with advocacy*

METHODS

Procedures

Upon receiving approval from the researcher's university Institutional Review Board, a survey consisting of forty-three questions, taking an estimated time of nine minutes to complete, was administered via campus Research Participation ListServ email to 12,862 students of a small Midwestern university, students were required to be of above the age of 18 and having been or currently be a student of that university. The respondents were asked to read and confirm the informed consent then were prompted to complete the electronic survey via Qualtrics. No incentives were offered for the participants to take the survey. The original email request for participants was sent out to the ListServ during the second week of January, 2018, with a reminder email sent five days after the initial request. Through the participating survey distribution tool no respondent could complete the survey twice.

Participants

Eight-hundred thirty-seven students participated, ranging from undergraduate to graduate students, generating a response rate of 6.5 percent. After reviewing the participants who had completed all the necessary items in the survey the sample was reduced to 781 participants ($n = 781$). Those participants who had completed enough survey measures (approximately 75 percent of the measures) for their information to be compared or tested were kept. Incomplete responses that did not have enough information to be tested and compared were removed. The sample included men ($n = 324$, 41.4 percent), women ($n = 430$, 55.1 percent), respondents who chose not to identify with a gender ($n = 17$, 2.2 percent), and respondents had no response ($n = 10$, 1.3 percent). Participants between the ages of 18 through 67 ($M_{age} = 22.83$), with 21.1 percent self-identifying as first-generation college students ($n = 164$), and 26.8 percent self-identifying as

coming from a family with multiple generations of [University] alumni ($n = 209$). Education

levels were distributed amongst college freshmen ($n = 166$, 21.3 percent), sophomores ($n = 130$,

16.6 percent), juniors ($n = 136$, 17.4 percent), seniors ($n = 114$, 14.6 percent), undergraduates in

their fifth year or more ($n = 56$, 7.2 percent), graduate students ($n = 168$, 21.5 percent), and

respondents had no response ($n = 11$, 1.4 percent). While the graduate student sample was small,

the data collected was included for the purpose of researching a wider range of consumers of

higher education. Ethnicity of the sample included Caucasian ($n = 670$, 85.8 percent), African

American ($n = 12$, 1.5 percent), American Indian or Alaskan Native ($n = 15$, 1.9 percent), Asian

($n = 31$, 4.0 percent), Middle-Eastern or Arabic ($n = 3$, 0.4 percent), Hispanic or Latino ($n = 13$,

1.7 percent), and those who selected Other ($n = 22$, 2.9 percent), and respondents had no

response ($n = 15$, 1.9 percent). A variety of questions were reverse-coded for effectiveness and

efficacy of responses.

Measures

      Information-Seeking Behaviors. Respondents were asked about their information-

seeking behaviors regarding their university using an 11-item Information-Seeking Scale

measuring Active Information-Seeking (six questions) and Passive Information-Seeking (five

questions) developed by Kelly, Eldredge, Dalton and Miller (2014). The participants were asked

questions regarding the way they find information and if they seek it out it out versus passively

observing it. The scale was originally developed for Heath-Information and questions were

therefore adapted to meet the needs of this study. For example: "I have done research on ___"

was changed to: "I have done research on [University]." Two questions (one in passive-

information seeking, one in active information-seeking) were reverse-coded for effectiveness and

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efficacy of responses. The scale's overall Cronbach's Alpha was $a = 0.92$, with a Cronbach's Alpha of $a = 0.94$ for passive information-seeking and $a = 0.90$ for active information-seeking.

Public relationship indicators. Respondents' anthropomorphism, professional benefit/expectation, personal commitment, community improvement and comparison of alternative scores were recorded using the 23-item Bruning and Galloway (2003) Expanded Organization–Public Relationship Scale. Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale anchored with the responses ranging from 1–strongly disagree to 7–strongly agree. Six questions (one in each individual scale) were reverse-coded for effectiveness and efficacy of responses. The Cronbach's Alpha for the anthropomorphism (6-item scale) was $a = 0.89$, Cronbach's Alpha for the professional benefit/expectation (6-item scale) was $a = 0.91$, $a = 0.92$ for personal commitment (4-item scale), $a = 0.88$ for community improvement (4-item scale) and comparison of alternatives (3-item scale) had a coefficient of $a = 0.55$. The scale as a whole had a score of, $a = 0.83$.

Advocacy. Respondents' willingness to recommend their university was measured from a 3-item scale derived from Fullerton (2005) on advocacy. Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale with responses ranging from 1–strongly disagree to 7–strongly agree. One question was cross coded for effectiveness and efficacy of responses. The wording of the questions was minimally altered to exchange "Gap" to the name of the university in question (with a Cronbach's alpha of $a = 0.96$). An example question would be "I will say positive things about Gap to other people," changed to: "I will say positive things about [University] to other people."

RESULTS

The first research questions of: "How will passive vs. active information-seeking about a university by its students on social media impact the overall public relationship (indicated by: anthropomorphism, professional benefit/expectation, personal commitment, community improvement and comparison of alternatives)?" was presented to determine how students seek information and how that impacts the public relationship.

A multiple linear regression was employed to examine the level of information-seeking (passive, active) as a predictor of overall public relations score (anthropomorphism, professional benefit/expectation, personal commitment, community improvement and comparison of alternatives). The scale was used as one variable to determine the overall quality of the public relationship between organization and consumer. Together passive and active information-seeking accounted for a significant portion of variance in the individuals' perceptions of the public relations efforts of their univeristy, F (2, 775) = 88.68, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.18$, $p < .001$. Specifically, the overall public relations score was positively predicted by how passively individuals sought information ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$) more so than the active information-seekers ($\beta = .085$, $p < .05$) (See Appendix E).

The second research question of: "Which of the public relationship indicators including: anthropomorphism, professional benefit/expectation, personal commitment, community improvement and comparison of alternatives (scores) best predicts the participants' willingness to recommend their university as a source of higher education?" was posed to determine the level of advocacy of the students and the effect of the public relations indicators on the advocacy.

A multiple linear regression was employed to examine the public relations indicators: anthropomorphism, professional benefit/expectation, personal commitment, community improvement and comparison of alternatives as predictors of advocacy (See Appendix F).

Together the public relations indicators accounted for a significant portion of variance in individuals' willingness to recommend their university (advocacy), $F(5, 773) = 401.97$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.72$, $p < .001$. Specifically, the willingness to recommend (advocacy) was positively predicted by the indicators of anthropomorphism ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .001$), professional benefit and expectations ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < .01$), personal commitment ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < .001$), community involvement ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < .05$), and the comparison of alternatives ($\beta = 0.13$, $p < .001$) (See Appendix G). Therefore, demonstrating that the indicator of personal commitment is the best predictor of individuals' willingness to recommend their university as a source of higher education.

Correlations were employed to examine the passive and active information-seeking and their association with advocacy of their university. Consistent with the hypothesis (H_{1A}) presented, active information-seeking was significantly positively associated with respondents' ratings of their willingness to recommend their university, $r = 0.28$, $p < .01$. However, contrary to what was predicted with the second hypothesis (H_{1B}), passive information-seeking was also positively associated with respondents' willingness to recommend their university, $r = 0.45$, $p < .01$, and at a higher level of association. Therefore, passive information-seekers may be more willing to recommend their university as a source of higher education than the active-information seekers.

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to examine the relationship between an organization's public relations efforts, viewers' information seeking behaviors and the impact both those have on the participants' willingness to recommend the organization to another person (advocacy). Research thus far has been confined to public relations efforts and advocacy and information-seeking and advocacy. This research has developed a combination of all three and the relationship these factors have on one another, therein providing the potential to enhance theory. It is the hope to bring clarity and shed some light on where efforts can be targeted to increase the benefits of an organization's public relationship strategies and its effects on customer referrals and retention.

In response to the first research question, regarding information-seeking and its impact on the overall public relationship, there was a positive relationship between the passive information-seekers and the active information-seekers and their overall public relationship scoring of the organization in question. Both types of information-seeking will have a positive impact if individuals are absorbing or seeking content about the organization. However, the passive information-seekers had a greater impact than the active information-seekers on the public relationship, which suggests that organizations would do well to focus their public relations strategies towards the passive users, instead of depending on active information-seekers to find information about the organization. For example, they should employ general advertisements, promoted posts, and information, rather than components that require users to find more information, would be best to reach this audience. That is not to say that an organization should only be catering to passive information-seekers. Since both types of information-seeking had a

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positive impact on the overall relationship, organizations should still have both avenues available, but should be placing a higher emphasis on the more passive style.

Secondly, the research question of the impact of the public relations indicators on advocacy was employed to find the area of public relations efforts that would provide the highest return of recommendations. Overall, each of the public relations indicators accounted for a significant amount of variance and were positively correlated with the participants' willingness to recommend their university to another individual. However, if an organization were looking to focus their efforts on a specific avenue of public relations to promote customer retention and referrals the data points toward the indicator of personal commitment or anthropomorphism as the most influential indicators relating to advocacy. Other indicators had a positive impact on advocacy, but results demonstrated that the most reliable and beneficial to focus on would be the indicators of anthropomorphism and personal commitment.

Lastly, the hypotheses regarding the relationship between information-seeking and the participants' willingness to recommend their university to someone else were examined. Consistent with "*H_{1A}: Active information-seeking is positively associated with advocacy,*" results showed a positive correlation between active information seeking and advocacy. Inconsistent with the hypothesis (H_{1B}) that was proposed; "*H_{1B}: Passive information-seeking will be negatively associated with advocacy,*" the results of the correlation showed a positive association between passive information-seeking and advocacy. This, although inconsistent with the hypothesis, is in alignment with the previous research questions' results. Passive information-seeking had a more significant correlation with the overall public relations (*RQ_1*), which may be related to the data showing the higher association between passive information-seeking and advocacy.

It is plausible to conclude that passive information seeking behavior among consumers will have a positive impact on their advocacy and over all perception of an organization's public relations efforts. This study shows meaningful and applicable interpretations through multiple linear regressions that demonstrated the perceived public relations efforts and their effect on advocacy and the type of information-seeking's effect on the perception of public relations and advocacy. This indicates that an organization may want to focus its efforts on demonstrating its level of *anthropomorphism* and *personal commitment* to its students in a way that will be seen passively on social media.

PRACTITIONER RECOMMENDATIONS

From this research conclusions can be drawn on how organizations should be handling their public relations and how altering them could produce a higher overall public image resulting in an increase in customer referrals. Grunig and Grunig's (1998) four models of public relations are excellent starting points. The four models defined by Grunig and Grunig (1998) include: *Public Information*; the neutral dissemination of information about an organization rather than advocating for that organization, *Press Agentry*; using public relations as a way to gain publicity for an organization, *Two-Way Symmetrical*; creating a mutual understanding of an organization between it and the publics it affects, and *Two-Way Asymmetrical*; using public relations to manage conflict, change attitudes and influence the behavior of the stakeholders of an organization. However, the afore-mentioned results of this study point to one in particular, the *Public Information Model*, which suggests that information is distributed using channels available but does not require *Press Agentry*, or reporters to write about the organization. A *Two-Way Asymmetrical* model, influencing the public and persuading them has proven effective. This research also suggests that a *Two-Way Symmetrical* model is another effective way to build a quality relationship with the stakeholders. All the models have their uses and it is recommended that each be used based on the goal the organization seeks to accomplish (Reagan, Sumner & Hill, 1992)

The passive information-seekers impacting the results of the pubic relationship scores suggest that the public relations efforts should be used to push information out instead of pull individuals in to find information on the organization website, embodying the *Public Information Model*. The research points towards providing information in a way that requires the least amount of work on the consumers' behalf as possible, presenting information in a way that will

not require further information-seeking behavior such as actively finding the organization on social media. This leads to proposition one for the benefit of the practitioner:

> *Proposition #1: It is recommended that organizations use social media to send out information to users that have not requested it and are not looking to find out more information than is presented, specifically, the passive information-seekers when looking to promote to overall public relationship with the consumer.*

In 2005, the Department of Health launched a campaign that sought to encourage the conversation between healthcare professionals and their patients (PR Week, 2005). This concept rings out loud and clear in the results of this research. A key way to enhance the overall public relationship with an organization's stakeholders and consumers is to highlight its personal commitment to the customer. An organization seeking to enhance that would simply distribute information that demonstrates that their consumers have been committed for a long period of time. This aligns with Cialdini's (2009) theories of influence, reinforcing that *social proof*; or demonstrating that others are using an organization or its goods and services and are enjoying them. These results take it one step further and show that when using social proof then the organization should be highlighting that these consumers have been with the organization for an extended period of time. Using a university setting as an example, the social media messaging should feature posts from current customers or to invoke feelings of long-term commitments, such as "Bob has been a [university member/supporter] for 57 years and has never missed a game," or "Even after graduation you are still a [university member], it isn't just for four years, it is a way of life." Following this, proposition two, tells the organization to use a *Two-Way Symmetrical Model* inviting the relationship, and showing customers that others have been with the organization for an extended period of time;

Proposition #2: It is recommended that organizations highlight to consumers the

way the organization has a personal commitment to its customers, and have

current customers share positive information about their relationship with the

organization, when seeking to bolster the public relationship with its consumers.

Based on the results of this study the indicator of anthropomorphism, the assigning of

human-like traits to an entity or organization (Bruning & Galloway 2003), also had a high impact

on the relationship between the organization and its consumers. Consumers want to feel like the

organization is there for them and will help them if they need (Entrepreneur, 2014). These traits

can stem from having good customer service to when consumers make a purchase they feel as

though the organization genuinely cares about the relationship that is forming (Entrepreneur,

2014). This indicates that organizations should employ the use of a *Two-Way Symmetrical Model*

to demonstrate the organization's humanistic qualities.

Proposition #3: It is recommended that organizations highlight to consumers the

way the organization has human like traits, or is: caring, considerate, and

personable, when seeking to bolster the public relationship with its consumers.

Lastly, the results indicated that the passive information-seekers are more likely to be the

individuals involved in referrals (advocacy). Meaning, that the social media campaign should

once again focus on the *Public-Information Model* limiting the action required from the

audience. When users need to interact to find more information or are asked to visit the page of

the organization the results have a much lower (3.36 percent) click-through rate, or percentage of

individuals who saw the advertisement and chose to actively seek out information about that

organization (Smart Insights, 2018). Whereas the individuals who are willing to simply observe

an advertisement (64.14 percent) is far greater than those willing to seek more information out.

Thus, proposition four suggests that the organization should use advertisements and promotional material that requires little to no effort on the part of the viewer:

Proposition #4: It is recommended that organizations use tactics to appeal to

passive information-seekers when attempting to promote customer referrals.

These propositions are based on the research completed in this study as guides for how organizations can use this information and implement it within their current public relations strategies. They are designed to assist in the increase and enhancement of overall organizations public relationships and the increase in referrals by current customers.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with all studies, there are limitations. Specifically, the four areas of error; sampling errors, non-coverage error, non-response error, and measurement error are most common, as described by MacDonald, Newburn-Cook Schopflocher and Richter (2009) can be applied to surveys distributed via email as well. Non-respondent error could be the largest culprit of errors within the data presented here.

There are benefits and drawbacks of using an online survey instrument. Benefits including the anonymity of the respondents, can be a limitation to researchers. The respondents may simply be clicking through the responses to complete the survey instead of providing meaningful responses, due to the fact that the responses cannot be traced to a specific individual and creating a possibility for inaccuracies. While this study was conducted at the beginning of a semester, it was also conducted within one week of a significant athletic success of the university's football team. That may have had a positive impact upon the overall perception of the public relations indicators as well as participants' willingness to recommend the university to others. There is potential for differing results if the survey was conducted at a different time during the semester, perhaps during an examination period, or if the athletic event had resulted in a loss rather than a win.

A final limitation regarding this research can be that the study cannot establish causation. The question of "why?" lingers on the air around the results. Future research would have the potential to investigate at a deeper level and discover the potential influential variables the would affect the reasoning behind why participants felt positively toward the university. The greater concepts can be broadly applied but there is the limitation that a university's recruitment

strategy, although similar, is not the exact same as influencing the purchase of a product (Kokemuller, 2007).

To unveil further communication phenomena there could be comparative research completed at different times during the semester to find a more accurate reading of the overall perception of the public relations efforts, the effects of information-seeking on them and their effects on advocacy. There is also the opportunity of understanding the effect of if a student is a legacy of the university or is a first-generation college student in the future. In future studies, there is a potential to compare the behaviors and relationships of undergraduate students and their university and the relationship between graduate students and their university. There is a large potential for future research which includes the possibility for determining why each variable and what specifically might impact that. If this study were to be repeated there could be the opportunity for a mixed-measures research including qualitative interviews with students to potentially understand the specifics regarding why the results occurred.

CONCLUSION

This study's findings should be interpreted alongside its limitations. While this study was able to derive meaning, the nature of this examination was exploratory and aimed to a specific communication phenomenon to provide guidelines for future research. Bearing this in mind, the results show that organizations' efforts to build upon their public relationship with their consumers can be altered by using the public relationship indicator of personal commitment. If the organization demonstrates the level at which they are committed to their consumers and do so in ways that would be seen passively via social media this study's data determined that they would most likely have an overall higher public relations score as well as an increased chance of consumer advocacy. For example, if the organization was creating advertisements on social media they would not want to ask for actions, i.e. likes/favorites, comments, or shares/retweets. Rather they would want to simply showcase how their current consumers have been committed to their organization for an extended period of time, but in a way, that simply appears in the social media feed of the consumer. This can help organizations restructure the way they handle their social media, and their public relations efforts on those channels. It has the potential to enhance recruitment and understand how college students are influenced on social media.

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APPENDIX A. EXPANDED ORGANIZATION-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIP SCALE

Please check in the blank based on what you feel or perceive in each statement. 7- point scale means as follows:

1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Slightly Disagree 4=Undecided (neutral) 5=Slightly Agree 6=Agree 7=Strongly Agree

NOTE: One question in each scale will be reversed for reverse-coding and ensuring accurate readings.

(Bruning & Galloway, 2003)

Anthropomorphism:
1. North Dakota State University is open about its plans for the future.
2. I feel that I can trust North Dakota State University to do what it says it will do.
3. North Dakota State University shares its plans for the future with students.
4. North Dakota State University does not understand me as a student.
5. North Dakota State University seems to be the kind of organization that invests in its students.
6. I think that North Dakota State University takes into account my convenience in all of our interactions.

Professional Benefit/Expectation:
7. North Dakota State University is not involved in activities that promote the welfare of its students.
8. North Dakota State University does not act in a socially responsible manner.
9. North Dakota State University is aware of what I want as a student.
10. North Dakota State University does not see my interests and its interests as the same.
11. I think North Dakota State University is not honest in its dealings with students.
12. North Dakota State University is not willing to devote resources to maintain its relationship with me.

Personal Commitment:
13. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with North Dakota State University.
14. I feel very strongly linked to North Dakota State University.
15. I do not want my relationship with North Dakota State University to continue for a long time.
16. I feel I would lose a great deal if I were to switch universities.

Community Improvement
17. I feel that North Dakota State University supports events that are of interest to its students.
18. I think that North Dakota State University does not strives to improve the communities of its students.
19. I think that North Dakota State University actively plays a role in the communities it serves.
20. North Dakota State University demonstrates interest in me as a person.

Comparison of Alternatives:
21. The alternative universities are not excellent educational institutions.
22. I think other universities could fulfill my needs.
23. I would not feel very upset if North Dakota State University were no longer my school.

APPENDIX B. INFORMATION-SEEKING SCALE

(Kelly, Eldredge, Dalton & Miller, 2014)

Active Information Seeking

1. I have asked North Dakota State University for information via social media.
2. I have searched for information on about North Dakota State University on social media.
3. I have not spoken to friends about North Dakota State University on social media.
4. I have watched for news stories about North Dakota State University on social media.
5. I have done research on North Dakota State University on social media.
6. I have looked for new information about North Dakota State University on social media.

Passive Information Seeking

1. I listen when I hear news about North Dakota State University.
2. I read stories about North Dakota State University on social media when I come across them.
3. I pay attention when I see information about North Dakota State University on social media.
4. I do not think about the information I find about North Dakota State University on social media.
5. Information about North Dakota State University catches my attention.

APPENDIX C. ADVOCACY SCALE

Advocacy (Fullerton, 2005) Questions
1. I will say positive things about North Dakota State University to other people.
2. I will not recommend North Dakota State University to someone who seeks my advice.
3. I will encourage friends and relatives to select North Dakota State University for their post-secondary education.

APPENDIX D. DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Age
2. Gender
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other
3. Education level
   a. Freshman
   b. Sophomore
   c. Junior
   d. Senior
   e. Undergraduate in 5th year or higher
4. Ethnicity
   a. Caucasian
   b. African-American
   c. Native-American or Alaskan Native
   d. Asian
   e. Middle-Eastern or Arab
   f. Hispanic or Latino
   g. Other
5. First generation college student (are you the first in your family to attend college?)
   a. Yes
   b. No
6. 2nd or greater generation of North Dakota State University attendance (has your family attended North Dakota State University)
   a. Yes
   b. No

APPENDIX E. PREDICTORS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS SCORE

	β
Active Information Seeking	0.085*
Passive Information Seeking	0.373***

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

APPENDIX F. PUBLIC RELATIONS INDICATORS AS INDICATORS OF ADVOCACY

	Advocacy	Anthropomorphism	Professional Benefit and Expectations	Personal Commitment	Community Improvement	Comparison of Alternatives
Advocacy	1.00	-	-	-	-	-
Anthropomorphism	0.720	1.00	-	-	-	-
Professional Benefit and Expectations	0.703	0.845	1.00	-	-	-
Personal Commitment	0.796	0.663	0.637	1.00	-	-
Community Improvement	0.700	0.793	0.778	0.692	1.00	-
Comparison of Alternatives	0.538	0.357	0.414	0.550	0.387	1.00

p < .001

APPENDIX G. PREDICTORS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS SCORE AND ADVOCACY

	β
Anthropomorphism	0.21***
Professional Benefit/Expectation	0.13**
Personal Commitment	0.46***
Community Involvement	0.07*
Comparison of Alternatives	0.13***

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