5-2014

Social Media Public Relations Practices of Community Non-Profit Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the use of social media for public relations in the non-profit sector. Specifically, self-perceptions and the implementation of social media by non-profit organizations was investigated through both interviews with social media practitioners and content analysis of Twitter. Through the lens of the five principles of dialogic communication, as set forth by Kent and Taylor (1998), eight community non-profit organizations were analyzed in a multiple case study. One interview and 150 tweets from a 12 month period were examined for each organization to determine the motivations for employing social media and whether dialogic communication was used to interact with stakeholders.

Through these analyses, this study answered four research questions: How do social media practitioners interpret the opportunities of using social media for community non-profit organizations’ public relations?, How do social media practitioners interpret the challenges of using social media for community non-profit organizations’ public relations?, How do social media practitioners interpret the outcomes of community non-profit organizations’ public relations via social media?, and How do community non-profit organizations use dialogic communication, as described in the dialogic theory of public relations, to connect with stakeholders via the social media platform Twitter?

The study yielded eight themes. Themes of opportunity included that social media is a low-cost tool, allows for education and awareness, provides a larger and more youthful audience, and facilitates real-time conversation and engagement. Themes of challenges included social media being time consuming, causing privacy and
confidentiality concerns, not being directed at non-profit organizations’ traditional support base, and being open to negative reactions and responses. Perceptions of outcomes of social media use for public relations included both physical donations and volunteers. However, positive outcomes were qualified by the belief that social media return on investment cannot be measured. In addition, results found that the non-profit organizations employed the principles of dialogic communicaiton in their tweets. The most prominent dialogic principle was usefulness of information (59.8%), while the least frequent was generation of return visits (23.3%). Four statistically significant comparisons were discussed between nationally affiliated and local non-profit organizations and their use of the principles of dialogic communication.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, who have been a source of constant love and support throughout my academic career. To my mother, without your encouragement I would not have made it through these past two years and I will forever be thankful. To my father, your service has always inspired me, and your example of determination and integrity has helped me become who I am today.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge my advisor, Darren Linvill, without whom this project would have never been realized. He fully supported me in this undertaking and I am so appreciative of his dedication and guidance. I am thankful that I had such an available and encouraging mentor who helped make me a better researcher. Darren was the perfect choice for my advisor, and I am so thankful for his input and advice. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Melinda Weathers and Jimmy Sanderson for their assistance and critique. Their input on this thesis has helped improve the project beyond measure. Thank you to all three for being on my committee and working with me on this project for the last year! I would also like to thank my friends and colleagues in the MACTS program for their support and camaraderie! Thank you to Alexander Moe specifically for being my second coder! Finally, I would like to thank the entire Communication Studies department for molding me into the scholar I have become.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Significant aspects of any organization are the methods through which communication occurs. Whether internal or external, organizational communication influences every aspect of an organization, from its structure to its achievements. However, since an organization requires stakeholders, such as customers, supporters, donors, volunteers, or even the media, the methods through which an organization addresses its publics are paramount. Communicating with stakeholders is especially significant for those organizations that rely heavily on their stakeholders such as non-profit organizations (Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). Organizations, and non-profit organizations in particular, need to understand effective communication models to operate efficiently.

It is through the study of public relations that organizations can address advancements in strategic interaction with stakeholders. Best practices within the field of public relations have traditionally been characterized by symmetrical two-way communication (Grunig, 1989), which allows stakeholders to provide feedback. Despite this traditional model, there have been recent developments in the field of public relations that suggest a more dialogic approach to stakeholder interaction. Dialogic communication includes not only allowing for feedback, but advocates for developing relationships between an organization and its stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In their seminal work, Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed dialogic communication as the most ethical and efficient tool for public relations.
In addition to increased support for dialogic communication, a recent trend in public relations is to utilize social media to engage stakeholders and establish relationships (Kent, Taylor, McAllister-Spooner, 2008). Social media are technological platforms that allow for social interactions (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Originally, social media were not accepted within public relations as effective tools, however, they have slowly been adopted into organizations as a suitable communication medium (Idugboe, 2010). Social media sites have “opened up new possibilities for organizations to connect with their stakeholders by allowing them to receive real-time feedback…and engage in conversations” (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012, p. 313).

As of August 2012, 69 percent of adults on the Internet were using social networking sites, a dramatic increase from only seven years prior when only 8 percent were using these sites (Brenner, 2012). Since social media are becoming an increasingly prevalent medium for communication, it is becoming more important to study its use and how it can be employed in a strategic and effective way. Understanding the benefits of social media for effective organizational communication could lead to more successful interactions with stakeholders, since such communication is one of the main functions of organizations. Moreover, communication via social media is especially important for non-profit organizations, which rely heavily on their stakeholders (Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). An example of a non-profit organization successfully utilizing social media to connect with their stakeholders is the national branch of the American Red Cross (Briones, Kich, Liu, & Jin, 2011).
Each year, the American Red Cross, a widely recognized nonprofit organization, responds to approximately 70,000 natural and man-made disasters (American Red Cross, 2012). The organization provides relief services and medical care to those affected by these emergencies. In order to provide these services, the American Red Cross relies on volunteers and donations (American Red Cross, 2012). This support is gained through effectively communicating their needs to the appropriate stakeholders, such as volunteers, the media, and the community (Briones et al., 2011). In order to connect with their stakeholders, the American Red Cross relies on many forms of communication, but one of their most successful links occurs through social media (Mansford, 2012).

The American Red Cross is one of the most well-known organizations to successfully utilize social media within the non-profit sector (Mansford, 2012). Briones, Kuch, Liu, and Jin (2011) conducted a study of the organization and its social media practitioners in order to determine what drives the organization’s successful relationship building practices. Participants described a need for two-way dialogue and made claims such as, “You want to be part of the conversation” (Briones et al., 2011, p. 39). The study focused mainly on the popular social media platforms Facebook and Twitter. The findings included the idea that using social media for public relations efforts affords many benefits for an organization. These benefits, as reported by the American Red Cross, include being able to provide faster service for the community, causing increased media coverage, and receiving feedback from stakeholders in which both positive and negative suggestions for improvement were offered (Briones et al., 2011). Overall, the study found that the American Red Cross was effective dialogically through “active
responses to posts and allowing the organization to gain ideas from its various publics” (Briones et al., 2011, p. 41).

In contrast to the positive findings of the study on the American Red Cross, some other research has concluded that non-profit organizations do not optimize social media’s communicative capabilities (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011). Instead, they tend to participate in one-way communication that simply disseminates information rather than continuing a conversation (Lovejoy et al., 2012). Waters and Jamal (2011) found that non-profit organizations do not utilize “the interactive nature and dialogic capabilities” that are offered through social media such as Twitter (p. 323). This research found “non-profit organizations are primarily using Twitter as a means of sharing information” and therefore not effectively utilizing the communication capabilities available (Waters & Jamal, 2011, p. 323). If non-profit organizations do not utilize the dialogic capabilities of the social media that they engage in, they will not benefit from the use of dialogue and relationship building associated with dialogic computer-mediated communication.

**Purpose of the Study**

In order to investigate the potential presence of dialogic communication within social media use of non-profit organizations, it is also imperative to explore the motivations behind social media use. The interpretations of the opportunities and challenges that social media sites—such as the microblogging site Twitter—afford may influence the actual utilization of such social media. There is the potential that despite the suggestions that dialogic communication is public relations best practices, non-profit
organizations are purposefully utilizing social media for information dissemination. It is possible that it is not the intention of non-profit organizations to utilize the dialogic capabilities of social media, such as the real-time interaction available on Twitter. The potential disconnect between the interpretations behind usage of social media and actual usage could provide insight into the application of social media for public relations purposes for non-profit organizations. Since non-profit organizations rely heavily on their stakeholders, communicating with stakeholders is one of the main functions of such organizations (Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). Therefore, research that promotes effective, dialogical practices via social media, such as Twitter, can lead to a better understanding of the best public relations practices for non-profit organizations and impact the success of such organizations.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Computer Mediated Communication

By definition, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is communication about or by means of computer technology (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). The transition of computers from highly specialized technology to personal possessions contributed to the increase in investigations relating to CMC (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2004). The study of CMC has been widely applied, allowing for discussions of all forms of human communication via the means of a computer. Some of those disciplines through which CMC has been studied include psychology (Gackenbach & Ellerman, 1998; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), politics (Dahlberg, 2001; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000), and education (Berge & Collins, 1995; McComb, 1994). In addition, CMC has also been widely studied within interpersonal communication. Topics of inquiry within this field include CMC’s impact on community building (Baym, 1998), identity formation (Henrickson, 2000), and self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001). Another branch of communication studies in which CMC investigations have been prolific is organizational communication.

CMC and Organizational Communication. Research on CMC has been extremely pervasive within the field of organizational communication. With the development of new technologies, and their subsequent adoption within organizations, research has turned to studying the effects of these technologies on the structure of
organizations and communication within the organizations (Jones, Watson, Gardner, & Gallois, 2004). New technologies that were traditionally studied in organizational communication include email (Adams, Todd, & Nelson, 1993; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), video teleconferencing (Fish, Kraut, Root, & Rice, 1992), and instant messaging (Cameron & Webster, 2005; Herbsleb, Atkins, Boyer, Handel, & Finholt, 2002). In addition to studying specific technologies, the field of organizational communication also included research on the impact of CMC on the social psychology of organization members (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998), working as a group (Flanagin, Tiyaamornwong, O’Connor, & Seibold, 2002) and cross-cultural collaboration (Rice, D’Ambra, & More, 1998; Walther, 1997).

Despite this proliferation of investigations in CMC and organizational communication, the research is not all encompassing. There is a lack of significant research within the field of CMC usage by non-profit organizations (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Some of the limited research has focused on customer relation management through technology (DiGrazia, Dahlen & Reale, 2000; Richard, Thirkell & Huff, 2007), the usage of email to build relationships with stakeholders (Gilbert, 2006), and most recently on the utility of social media (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Greenberg & MacAuley, 2009; Waters et al., 2009).

Despite the lack of knowledge on the use of computer-mediated communication within the non-profit sector, there has been some consensus on the idea that it is not being utilized to its full potential. As Gilbert (2006) found in his studies of non-profit organization use of email for relationship building, the organizations were not taking
advantage of the technology. He found that despite the well-documented benefits and low cost of email, the non-profit organizations were not using it to build stakeholder relationships. This lack of utilization may be indicative of a trend within the non-profit sector to delay usage of newly adopted technologies. Non-profit organizations have traditionally been slower to implement new technologies and strategies than commercial, for-profit organizations (Boeder, 2002).

Despite their great need for stakeholder participation, non-profit organizations often lag significantly behind traditional organizations in cultivating new methods of connection and relationship building. Previous research has indicated that non-profit organizations could reach larger groups of stakeholders through use of the Internet and social technologies. The research found that utilization of new technologies would allow non-profit organizations to move beyond their traditional groups of volunteers and broaden their reach to a younger, more socially mobile demographic (Allen, Warwick, & Stein, 1996). Despite the apparent lag in non-profit organizations’ adoption of new technologies, previous research still indicated that non-profits would benefit just as much as for-profit organizations from the implementation of new communication technologies (Boeder, 2002; Curtis et al., 2010; Saxton & Game, 2001).

Social Media. One such new technology that has begun to be adopted into organizational communication is social media. Social media are forms of CMC that allow for social interaction (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media are interactive platforms that facilitate human communication, information sharing, creation, and commentary (Kietzmann et al., 2011).
There are many different forms of social media, crafted for differing reasons, but all to create interaction between users. Some of the different forms include those for professional connections, such as LinkedIn, and those for media sharing, such as MySpace, YouTube, and Flickr. There are also social media sites for social news, such as Reddit, Digg, and Delicious. Blogs can also be considered social media, especially since the ever-growing blogosphere is becoming increasingly connected. In addition to these forms of social media, there are also social networking sites (SNS). SNS are web-based platforms that people use to create a profile, to display their connections with others, and explore the profiles of others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), SNS “are primarily organized around people, not interests” (p. 219). Different platforms that could be considered social networking sites include Facebook and Twitter, which do center on the social interactions of people through designated profiles. While both are significant, Twitter cannot only be designated as a social networking site, but also as a platform for the type of CMC designated as microblogging.

**Twitter.** Twitter was founded in March of 2006 as a microblogging and social networking technology (Picard, 2011). The platform allows users to instantaneously send concise messages to a global audience. These messages, or “tweets” can consist of 140 characters or less and are transmitted in real-time. Each Twitter user has followers—those who subscribe to their tweets—and can follow other users (“About Twitter”, 2012). Worldwide, there are more than 140 million active Twitter users, making it a significant medium for communication (“What is Twitter?”, 2012). Through its design as an
interactive social platform, Twitter allows for the potential of dialogic communication, which helps establish equitable relationships.

Social media such as Twitter also allow for recipients of messages to provide feedback, through various communication tools, essentially creating a virtual conversation. Some of these tools include retweets, which are forwarded tweets from other users, as well as replies, which are responses to another user’s tweet. Twitter also offers its users the ability to use direct messages, which are private messages between users. Finally, Twitter users can utilize the symbol ‘#’ to hashtag something, or mark keywords or topics within their tweets. This function of Twitter allows for certain topics, companies, ideas, etc. to trend or become popular topics within the Twitter platform (“The Twitter Glossary”, 2012).

The initial reception of Twitter was similar to that of previous communication technologies. According to Arceneaux and Schmitz-Weiss (2010), at first, many dismissed the technology as useless or unnecessary. However, as time progressed and Twitter showed its potential utility, attitudes began to shift. The media began reporting on the benefits of Twitter, especially on its value as an instant news connection. Key moments in Twitter’s establishment include helping to break news stories about major events such as protests and catastrophes (Arceneaux & Schmitz-Weiss, 2010).

The acceptance and diffusion of Twitter can be seen in the increasing use of the social media platform. According to Bullas (2012), since November 2010, overall usage of Twitter has nearly doubled. In fact, 16 percent of online adults currently use Twitter, meaning its popularity has grown significantly in the six years since Twitter’s advent.
Women more often than men utilize the social media platform, and there is a significantly larger population of African-Americans on Twitter in comparison to Caucasians and Hispanics (Bullas, 2012). Although Twitter users range in demographic characteristics, there is a general trend for the platform to be used for informational motives; although, there is also significant social utility (Johnson & Yang, 2009). These motives could include keeping abreast of news or connecting to the community.

After the widespread diffusion of Twitter into the mainstream, researchers began to study it in multiple fields through different contexts. There have been studies on the basic uses of Twitter, as well as the potential adoption of Twitter (Hughes & Palen, 2009; Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007). More specific studies began to proliferate, such as studies on the social influence of Twitter and Twitter’s influence on social presence (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdry, 2009). Certain topics of inquiry began to become the focus of multiple studies, such as sentiment on Twitter or the potential utility of Twitter in emergency events (Barbosa & Feng, 2010; Bollen, Mao, & Pepe, 2011; Chew & Eysenbach, 2010; Davidov, Tsur, & Rappoport, 2010; Go, Bhayani, & Huang, 2009; Vieweg, Hughes, Starbird, & Palen, 2010). Overall, Twitter has been increasingly prevalent in research as the social media platform gained recognition and popularity among users.

In addition to being prevalent in studies, Twitter was incorporated into the world of business due to its apparent success with individuals. Although social media was originally viewed as running against traditional public relations values, it eventually became seen as an augmentation of the field. Specifically, Twitter became central to
public relations because of its ability to connect organizations to their publics instantly and in real-time. The platform also allows businesses to monitor their brands, receive feedback, and build relationships (“About Twitter”, 2012; Idugboe, 2010). Common commercial uses for Twitter are offering promotions, advertising, sending press releases, and answering consumer questions (Arceneaux & Schmitz-Weiss, 2010). In order to provide all of these uses to businesses and organizations, Twitter offers multiple communication tools that can be related to dialogue. For example, the two main tools to provide a dialogue with stakeholders are retweets and replies. These tools allow for interactive communication between an organization and its public, which is an essential part of dialogic public relations.

**Dialogic Communication**

Dialogic communication has, over the past two decades, become an increasingly important concept in the field of public relations. According to Kent, Taylor, and McAllister-Spooner (2008), the dialogic theory of public relations has stemmed from the maturation of the field, and provides “valuable ways to understand effective and ethical public relations” (p.1). Dialogic communication is grounded in the historical research on dialogue and its foundations, which advocate the building of relationships. This is a departure from the traditionally accepted best practices in public relations. During the development of the dialogic theory of public relations, five tenets were designated in order to apply dialogic communication to public relations. To fully understand this transition to dialogic communication, it is important to understand the traditionally accepted practices and historical research from which it developed.
Customarily, there has been a four-model approach to public relations as proposed by Grunig (1989). These four models can be split into two groups, those that involve one-way communication and those that involve two-way communication. One-way communication models include publicity and public information, which are essentially communication practices that disseminate information. On the other hand, two-way communication models account for the reaction of the public. The two-way asymmetrical model of public relations is described as communication that allows for persuasion or manipulation of the public through dissemination, but conducts that manipulation through consideration of public opinion. Finally, there is the two-way symmetrical model, which allows for organizations to negotiate or promote understanding with their publics through interaction and consideration of public input (Grunig, 1989; Grunig & Grunig, 2008).

The common belief in public relations has traditionally been that best practices include two-way models of communication rather than one-way methods of information dissemination. This belief can be seen in the establishment of the excellence theory of public relations, which stated that effective external and internal communication between an organization and its public would be based on a relationship building two-way model (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). Recently, public relations practitioners have begun to build upon the idea of two-way communication and expand its scope. Rather than simply considering the reaction and input of the public, public relations practitioners have begun to establish a model of building relationships between an organization and its stakeholders. This shift in practice heralds the theoretical shift from a basic model of two-way communication to a focus on dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002).
It is through dialogues that organizations can build and maintain relationships with its stakeholders.

Pearson (1989) first discussed the dialogic theory of public relations in his doctoral dissertation on dialogue as a concept in public relations ethics. Pearson (1989) explained that the ethics of public relations rely on establishing and maintaining communication relationships. Although this was dialogue’s first application to public relations, the concept of dialogue has a rich history; however, a brief overview will illuminate the overarching themes of equality and mutuality. Dialogue and its ethical implications can find its roots in multiple disciplines, including philosophy, rhetoric, psychology, and relational communication. According to Kent and Taylor (2002), “philosophers and rhetoricians . . . considered dialogue . . . as one of central means of separating truth from falsehood” (p. 22). Through his explanation of the concept of dialogue, theologian Martin Buber (1970; 1985) claims that dialogue should imply an effort to recognize other opinions as equal and be based on reciprocity, mutuality, involvement, and openness. According to Kent and Taylor (1998), Buber is the founder of dialogic theory with the view of dialogue as an intersubjective process, meaning that there is shared meaning between the participants in the dialogue.

In the field of psychology, dialogue relates to the “implicit . . . belief that the orientation that one holds toward others in interactions influences the quality of the communication, and ultimately, influences the development of the relationship” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 22). Carl Rogers (1994) agrees with this sentiment and suggests that effective relationships involve equal, positive respect for the other. Finally, in the field of
relational communication, dialogue is yet again considered as a “framework for thinking about ethical and fulfilling relationships” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 22). A scholar of relational communication, Johannesen (1990), described five characteristics of dialogue, which include empathic understanding, positive regard, presentness, mutual equality, and a supportive climate.

Overall, early musings about dialogue were focused on establishing its characteristics. Characteristics for dialogic communication were also developed within public relations and communication research. The definition of dialogue used for this study is the same as that used by Kent and Taylor (1998), which described dialogue as a “negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (p. 325). To further establish the definition of dialogue after their seminal work, Kent and Taylor (2002) explicated the five tenets of dialogue:

Mutuality, or the recognition of organization-public relationships; propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, commitment, or the extent to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics. Within each of these tenets, there are multiple ideas that support and explain the overall concept. (p. 25)

Mutuality can be described as a collaborative orientation, which suggest organizations must account for culture and ideology (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The aspect
of collaboration within mutuality is explained by Kent and Taylor (2002) when they state, “all individuals engaged in dialogue should have positions of their own, and should advocate for those positions” (p. 25). Another aspect within the concept of mutuality is the idea of equality. The dialogic theory of public relations postulates that for effective communication, the consumers and stakeholders must be considered as equals by the organization (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Participants within a dialogue should avoid manipulating power within the conversation to control the flow or direction, and instead should acknowledge the equality of the other conversant (Johannesen, 1990; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Pearson, 1989). In relation to public relations, mutuality means that the organizations should consider the opinions and positions of its stakeholders.

The next tenet of dialogue is propinquity, which is described for organizations as “publics are consulted in matters that influence them;” while for publics it is described as “[publics] are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 26). This idea is conceptualized through immediacy of presence, temporal flow, and engagement. Immediacy of presence implies that the communication is directed at the present and in a shared space (Anderson, 1994; Buber, 1970; Rogers, 1994). Temporal flow explains that dialogic communication relates to the past, present, and future. Specifically, dialogue looks to the future to be equitable for all involved (Anderson, 1994; Johannesen, 1990). Finally, engagement explains that participants must be invested in the dialogue. Within public relations, engagement implies that organizations should consider and respect the needs of their publics (Anderson, 1994; Buber, 1970; Johannesen, 1990).
Another concept within dialogic communication is empathy, which is divided into three characteristics: supportiveness, communal orientation, and confirmation. According to Kent and Taylor (2002), supportiveness occurs when dialogue is open to all participants and is easily accessible. Communal orientation implies that all participants within a dialogue are linked both locally and globally. In relation to public relations, this means that organizations should become involved in the communities they communicate with (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Finally, there is the characteristic of confirmation, which refers to “acknowledging the voice of the other in spite of one’s ability to ignore it” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 27). This means that organizations need to acknowledge that there will be those who do not agree with them, but still deserve to be heard. This is especially important because as Taylor (2000) found, publics that are ignored by an organization will not be willing to engage with that organization. Overall, “a sympathetic orientation to publics may help the organization improve relationships with external groups” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 28).

The fourth tenet of dialogue is risk, which is implicit in all relationships. Risk is conceptualized through three characteristics: vulnerability, unanticipated consequences, and recognition of strange otherness. Vulnerability refers to the sharing of information, beliefs, desires, etc. It is necessary in dialogue that information be shared which can therefore leave participants vulnerable to power manipulation, but also exposes them to the possibility of growth (Anderson, 1994). Unanticipated consequences refer to the fact that dialogue is not rehearsed and should therefore not be predictable or controlled (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Finally, the last characteristic of risk is recognition of strange otherness,
which essentially refers to the idea that others are not like oneself and therefore must be accepted and respected for their unique input to the dialogue (Anderson, 1994; Buber, 1970; Rogers, 1994). In general, risk is not seen as beneficial within public relations, however, in order to reap the rewards of dialogic communication, risk is a necessity.

The fifth and final tenet of dialogue is commitment, which is characterized by genuineness, commitment to conversation, and commitment to interpretation. Genuineness refers to the need to be open and honest within a dialogue and to endeavor to make the relationship the priority in order to reach mutually acceptable solutions (Anderson, 1994; Buber, 1970; Johannesen, 1990; Rogers, 1994). Commitment to conversation is a concept that explains, “sharing the same meanings or working toward common understandings is crucial to dialogic relationships” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 29). The last characteristic of commitment is commitment to interpretation. Dialogue is intersubjective, or has a shared meaning, and therefore requires interpretation. Interpretation of positions, beliefs, and values of others should be conducted fairly, not with a requirement of agreement, but of tolerance and understanding (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

These five tenets of dialogic communication are important concepts for the ethical practice of public relations. Therefore, they should be considered in all forms of communication an organization has with its stakeholders. Since CMC has become a common form of communication, there is a great opportunity for organizations to expand their dialogic efforts by using CMC. More specifically, utilizing social media and its interactive capabilities to create dialogue and build relationships with stakeholders.
Computer-Mediated Dialogic Communication

Through the tenets of dialogic communication, organizations can work toward creating effective communication with their stakeholders. However, successful dialogue “requires an organizational commitment and an acceptance of the value of relationship building” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 30). According to Rice (2002), the Internet allows for more balanced relationships between organizations and their stakeholders as well as fostering participation within communities. Essentially, the boundaries of communication between organizations and their stakeholders have been weakened. The Internet has provided a medium through which communication and contact is easier, therefore, stakeholders can interact with organizations and develop relationships (Rice, 2002).

Research surrounding CMC and its dialogic applications has been rather limited. Although there have been studies into dialogic communication via websites (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007), Facebook (McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Waters et al., 2009), and Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010), the results have almost exclusively shown that dialogic communication is not being fully utilized within the realm of CMC. Even across different contexts, such as colleges (McAllister, 2012; McAllister & Taylor, 2012; McAllister & Taylor, 2007), for-profit organizations (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007), advocacy groups (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009) and non-profit organizations (Lovejoy et al., 2012; Waters et al., 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011), the results show that there is a lack of efficient use of the dialogic principles as addressed in the dialogic theory of public relations.
However, there still remain opportunities to further explore the usage of dialogic communication and the reasons behind its application to public relations. For instance, a majority of the research has focused on more traditional forms of CMC, such as websites, instead of newer technologies, like social media (Kang & Norton, 2006; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Reber & Kim, 2006; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). There are aspects of social media, and certain social networking platforms, that lend themselves to dialogic communication. Specifically, Twitter provides a platform for organizations to interact with their stakeholders while also allowing users to engage with each other (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009).

Research on dialogic communication within CMC has resulted in an operationalization of the theory as it applies to different platforms. Kent and Taylor (1998) developed dialogic principles that relate dialogic characteristics to the Internet. These five principles include: ease of interface, usefulness of information, conservation of return visits, generation of return visits, and the dialogic loop. In order to fully understand the utilization of these principles, it is important to understand their relationship to dialogue. Each principle relates to some of the tenets of dialogue, as clarified by Kent and Taylor (2002).

Ease of interface can be related to both the tenets of propinquity and empathy. One aspect of propinquity is described as immediacy of presence, in which participants in the dialogue communicate in the present and in a shared space (Kent & Taylor, 2002). This concept can easily be related to the interface of a medium, because that interface allows for presence, or in the case of Twitter real-time or immediate communication. The
interface of Twitter, along with other social media interfaces become shared places in which one interacts with other users. Ease of interface can also be related to the characteristic of empathy and the idea of supportiveness. Supportiveness is described as encouraging and facilitating participation (Kent & Taylor, 2002). When an interface is easy to use, it facilitates participation in dialogue and contributes to an atmosphere of support.

Usefulness of information can also be related to the five tenets of dialogue presented by Kent and Taylor (2002). Empathy can be seen in the principle of usefulness of information, because of its relations to the communal orientation and supportiveness. Useful information provided by an organization will help create a community around a topic or cause, while the information can also be seen as supportive for the same reasons as ease of interface, pertinent information facilitates participation in dialogue.

Both conservation and generation of return visits relate to the same tenets within the characteristics of dialogue. Propinquity is described by Kent and Taylor (2002) through the concept of temporal flow that implies that dialogue is relational and looks toward the future. Therefore, through the conservation of return visits and generation of return visits, the organization can focus on the future of the dialogue. Essentially the interactions should encourage future interaction, or return visits. Another tenet that conservation and generation of return visits relates to commitment. Commitment is described as encouraging dedication to the conversation and interpretation (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Therefore, when there is conservation and generation of return visits it
indicates that the organization is putting effort into the dialogue and is continually working at facilitating that dialogue.

The final principle of CMC dialogue is the dialogic loop. This principle embodies all five of the tenets of dialogue and is therefore the most important and applicable to this study. The dialogic loop indicates that there is a mutual and equal relationship between an organization and its public, thus it refers to mutuality. Propinquity relates to the aspects of spontaneity and engagement seen in the dialogic loop. The loop allows for participants to be accessible and a part of the conversation. Empathy can be seen in the dialogic loop in that it allows for support and gives the organization the opportunity for “walking in the shoes of their publics” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 27). Risk can also be seen in the dialogic loop, because any form of dialogue will include some risk. The organization and the consumer both make themselves vulnerable when providing an opinion or a belief and contributing to a conversation. Finally, commitment can also be seen in the dialogic loop for the inherent reason that it is a loop, which implies continuity. Dialogue is essentially a continuance of a conversation, and if an organization participates in continuing a conversation then they are showing commitment.

**Dialogic communication via Twitter.** Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) developed an operationalization of these five dialogic principles in relation to social media, Twitter specifically. Within their study, Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) made adjustments and decided to omit the principle of ease of interface, because Twitter’s interface is standardized across profiles. It is also important to note that Twitter’s interface is designed for simplicity across devices and screen sizes (Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2013).
Therefore the dialogic principles that ease of interface embodies are taken for granted within Twitter. The interface is so easy to use and accessible that it has great potential for dialogue, but also does not require operationalization.

Usefulness of information was operationalized through the idea that organizations target three main publics including media, investors, and customers (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). Therefore, examples of useful information available on Twitter can include: links to news releases, video and audio, industry news, newsrooms, policies. In general, links to the organization’s page or some form of informational site about that organization, including other social media sites were included for usefulness of information (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Conservation of return visits can be understood through Taylor et al.’s (2001) argument that organizations should keep viewers on their pages and not encourage participants to visit other organization’s sites. This principle was operationalized as links to an organization’s extended social network, such as Facebook, Flickr, Tumblr, YouTube, etc. In addition, any links that guided users to an organizations website other than their newsroom is also considered conservation of visitors as is regular posting (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

Another principle operationalized by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) is generation of return visits. Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) state that organizations should encourage stakeholders to repeat interaction in order to build a relationship. This concept can include links to requests for additional information, an event calendar or description, links to discussion forums or frequently asked question pages (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).
Any communication that encourages users to return would be classified under generation of return visits.

Finally, the last principle of dialogic communication to be operationalized is the dialogic loop. For this study, the dialogic loop is the most critical principle, because it highlights the overall dialogic function of Twitter that organizations could be utilizing. The CMC dialogic loop is described as “whether the company engages in discussion by posing a question…or by engaging in a dialogic opportunity by responding directly to a question or comment posted by another user” (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010, p. 338). Within Twitter, responsiveness can be operationalized through replies and retweets.

**Research Questions**

CMC and social media have become established forms of communication within organizations. Social media specifically has the potential for facilitating real-time interaction between an organization and its stakeholders and has therefore become an integral communication channel for businesses. Since the real-time interactions on social media are reflective of dialogue, the connection to best practices in public relations is apparent. Dialogic communication is essential to the public relations goal of building relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002). Therefore, since social media platforms are potentially dialogic communication channels, they are now considered great augmentations to the field of public relations. Despite this, there is a lack of research on non-profit organizations’ use of Twitter for public relations purposes. As such, the following research questions were posed:
RQ1: How do public relations practitioners interpret the opportunities of using social media for community non-profit organizations’ public relations?

RQ2: How do public relations practitioners interpret the challenges of using social media for community non-profit organizations’ public relations?

RQ3: How do public relations practitioners interpret the outcomes of community non-profit organizations’ public relations via social media?

RQ4: How do community non-profit organizations use dialogic communication, as described in the dialogic theory of public relations, to connect with stakeholders via the social media platform Twitter?
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In order to determine the interpretations of the use of dialogic communication on social media practiced by community non-profit organizations, a mixed method study was conducted. A mixed method study is defined as a study in which both quantitative and qualitative inquiries are made in order to research one phenomenon (Creswell, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). In this study, the researcher used a mixed method approach: first, in-depth semi-structured interviews and second, content analysis. Due to the progression of the analyses, this study would be considered a sequential exploratory study (Creswell, 2009). A mixed method study, such as this, is an extension of previous research in the field, which has primarily been content analyses to determine the existence of dialogic communication within computer mediated communication (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2013; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters et al., 2009).

Through thematic analysis, the interviews yielded themes, while the supplemental content analysis elaborated on the interviews’ findings and allowed for more in-depth understanding (Creswell et al., 2003). Both the interviews and the content analysis were interpreted through the lens of a multiple case study, meaning that the analysis and comparison of cases was used as an investigative procedure (Yin, 2009). The patterns of beliefs and actions of the organizations in relation to dialogic communication were examined in each case to understand decisions related to the public relations choices on social media of community non-profit organizations. In addition, a multiple case study
allows for exploration. Specifically, this study aimed to determine the opportunities, the challenges, and the outcomes associated with non-profit organizations’ social media public relations strategies.

Prior to conducting the research, this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Both methods were reviewed to ensure the appropriateness of the interview protocol and the coding procedures. This process was necessary in order to protect the rights of the participants, as well as the integrity of the project.

Sample

In order to answer the research questions, this study looked at non-profit organizations, which were locally based and utilized Twitter to communicate with stakeholders. Twitter was chosen as the focal social media platform because of the scope of this study, as well as the association of Twitter with conversation. Twitter has been lauded as a platform for global conversation, and would therefore be a potential tool for dialogic public relations (“Twitter Page”, 2013). Certain conditions were necessary for each organization to qualify for inclusion in this study, which made criterion sampling an appropriate choice to determine which organizations were investigated (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Criterion sampling calls for a set of characteristics for inclusion to be applied to the potential population for the purpose of sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The criteria utilized for this study were that each organization chosen was a non-profit organization based in the Upstate of South Carolina. This means that the organization either was a locally founded organization or that it was a local chapter of a national non-profit. In addition to their geographic location and social reach, the
organizations had to also meet the criteria of being active on the social networking site Twitter. The final criterion was that the non-profit organizations had to be willing to participate in the study.

The community non-profit organizations chosen were located in a regional area of South Carolina. This region was the Upstate, an area in the northwestern corner of South Carolina, located at the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The area is known for its tourism and outdoor activities, and due to its location along a stretch of I-85, it is a commerce rich area. The three cities chosen for study from this region are the three most populous, Greenville, Spartanburg, and Anderson. Not only was this region chosen for its popularity and affluence, this specific locality was also chosen for its availability for research. As Schatzman and Strauss (1973) note, a researcher must determine the feasibility of the study “against his [or her] own resources of time, mobility, skills and whatever else it takes to do the job” (p. 19).

An original list of non-profit organizations was compiled from available lists of non-profit organizations located in Greenville, Spartanburg, and Anderson in South Carolina, as previously determined for study. The lists were available on a privately funded website originally developed as a learning and public service project as a directory for information on South Carolina at the Citadel, a military university located in South Carolina. The site, called sciway.net, which stands for the South Carolina Information Highway, has over 7 million visitors each year. Over 50,000 links are available on the site to other websites with information on South Carolina. In addition, extensive lists, such as those relating to education, real estate, history, etc. are all
available on the website (“What is SCIWAY?”; 2013). In total, there were 119 non-profit organizations listed on the database as located in the three previously determined cities, and were therefore the population from which to determine the sample.

These 119 organizations were reduced to those that actively utilized the social platform Twitter. Active utilization of Twitter was determined by measuring the number of tweets an organization posted on average. The minimum requirement to be defined as an active account was determined to be at least one post every third day. This requirement was determined to ensure that each organization chosen for study displayed meaningful engagement with Twitter. After the original list of non-profit organizations was narrowed to only those with active Twitter accounts, a list of 24 organizations remained. At that point, the researcher contacted each non-profit organization on the list to negotiate access. Only those non-profit organizations that granted access to their personnel who operated their social media accounts, specifically the Twitter account, were included in this study. The resulting sample size was eight organizations.

The eight organizations included community non-profit organizations with a variety of missions and affiliations. Four organizations were categorized as nationally affiliated, as they were either local branches of national organizations, or associated with a national support network. The other four organizations were categorized as local community non-profit organizations. These organizations did not have a national organization or support network, but were established locally. Differences between the nationally affiliated and local non-profit organizations include that nationally affiliated organizations were more likely to have more employees, with more specialized
responsibilities. In addition, local non-profit organizations were more likely to rely more on their volunteer base than nationally affiliated non-profit organizations.

The nationally affiliated organizations included the American Red Cross Western Carolinas Region, an organization focused on alleviating suffering in the face of emergencies. Another nationally affiliated organization was Meals on Wheels of Greenville, which provides meals to those who are homebound. The YMCA of Greenville, which advocates youth development and healthy living, was a third nationally affiliated non-profit. The final nationally affiliated non-profit organization was Goodwill Industries of Upstate/Midlands SC, whose mission is to educate and train with a goal of employment.

The other organizations were locally based and included Haven of Rest Ministries, which aids those with life-dominating problems. A second locally based non-profit was Project Hope, which has a goal to improve the lives of those with autism. Project Host, which uses food to feed the hungry and train the unemployed, was a third locally based non-profit. The final locally based non-profit organization was Dogs for Autism, which is an organization that provides autism service dogs for families in need.

**Interviews**

Interviews were conducted with the social media practitioners of each non-profit organization. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the non-profit organizations so as to gather data that would yield motivations and interpretations of the use of Twitter for public relations. These were respondent interviews as they relied on the interviewee to provide open-ended responses in order to
elicit “the interpretations that people attribute to their motivations to act” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 179). It is through these interpretations that the respondents provided the opportunities, challenges, and outcomes of using Twitter for public relations, especially as related to the relationship building aspect of dialogic communication.

In this study, the researcher served in the capacity of the interviewer as a miner (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The distinct goal of these interviews was to discover deeper interpretations and motivations behind the use of social media public relations from the community non-profit organizations. In order to get at the true interpretations of the social media practitioners, the researcher allowed the respondents to discuss the topic openly and without leading (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Despite that the interviews were driven by the thoughts and beliefs of the respondents, they were also informed by the dialogic theory of public relations. Some of the questions developed as part of the interview protocol (see Appendix A) were written specifically to focus on the characteristics of dialogic communication.

**Interview respondents.** As previously stated, the researcher conducted the interviews with one employee from each of the eight community non-profit organizations. The sample of organizations was determined based on specific criteria, which included providing access to an interview respondent. The chosen respondent from each organization was either in charge of social media relations or actively worked with the organization’s social media accounts, specifically the Twitter account. During the time of negotiating access, the researcher elicited respondents through email and phone discussions. Each respondent was additionally sent via email a copy of an informed
consent so as to assure the participants of the parameters of the study and of the confidentiality that would be upheld.

One interviewee was selected from each organization. A majority of the respondents were women (75%), although men were included within the sample (25%). Those employed at the nationally affiliated non-profit organizations were more likely to have professional experience with social media, while those at a local non-profit organizations were often only personally experienced with social media before taking over their position. In addition, those who were employed at local non-profit organizations were more likely to have a wide range of responsibilities, while those at nationally affiliated non-profits were more likely to be dedicated to public relations or marketing.

**Interview procedures.** Upon accepting the invitation to be interviewed, the researcher scheduled face-to-face interviews with each respondent. The interviews were 25-45 minutes in length (M=32:20) and were conducted in the workplaces of the interviewees for their convenience and comfort. The respondents were again given a copy of the informed consent before the interview began. Additionally, after permission was asked for and received, each interview was recorded and then later transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

Before beginning the interviews, the researcher established trust and interest, or rapport, with the participants. In order to create rapport, prior to the interview date, the researcher had gained permission for the interview by the individual interviewees. In addition, the researcher disclosed the motivation for the interviewees’ participation in the
given study. Finally, the researcher also granted anonymity to the participant and reviewed the purpose of the study with the interviewee. Reviewing the terms of the investigation allowed the researcher to answer any questions and establish a connection with the participants (Creswell, 2013).

During each of the interviews, the researcher followed the interview protocol previously compiled. Each organization had the same protocol questions, which ranged from basic questions about the practitioner’s role in the organization to the specific public relations practices endorsed by the non-profit organization. Although the researcher did not make changes to the existing questions, if needed, more information was prompted through additional questions or a request to elaborate on questions so as to explain and elicit more exhaustive answers. However, after each digression, the researcher would return to the original protocol. As the interviews progressed, the researcher included additional questions that emerged as relevant and aided in soliciting desired responses (see Appendix B). Overall, the interview protocol was revised so as to garner the most information from the interviewees in order to determine the interpretations of each respondent surrounding their organizations’ use and motivations for use of dialogic communication within the overall practice of utilizing social media for public relations purposes.

**Interview analysis.** In order to analyze the interview transcripts, thematic analysis, or the inductive identification of patterns within a data set, was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This form of qualitative analysis allows for open and direct analysis of qualitative data without the strictures of applying any specific theory. In addition,
thematic analysis finds patterns of meaning both across data sets and within specific cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This form of qualitative analysis was particularly beneficial for this investigation, which included multiple interviews with public relations practitioners, but across different contexts.

To begin, as is recommended by Creswell (1998), a general overview of the transcriptions was performed. All of the interviews were reviewed “to obtain a sense of the overall data” (Creswell, 1998, p. 140). In order to more critically analyze the interviews, initial coding, as well as margin notations were utilized to form preliminary impressions of the data. Initial coding is the process of breaking down data into “discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). The initial codes and memos led to the aggregation of key concepts and categories supported by evidence across multiple interviews (Creswell, 2013). Initial coding and notation led to twenty-two preliminary categories.

After the initial findings, the researcher winnowed the categories of data by classifying the original codes into broader themes. This classification process aggregated the smaller, more specific categories and codes into larger groups through discovering repeated patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The patterns of information, which resulted in overarching themes, formed common ideas within the codes (Creswell, 2013). The resulting list consisted of eight themes, four relating to opportunities and four relating to challenges associated with social media use for public relations of non-profit organizations.
The final step in the process of the thematic analysis of the interviews was the interpretation of the established themes, leading to naturalistic generalizations. In this case, interpretation was conducted through a lens of a multiple case study. As described by Yin (2009), a synthesis of multiple cases is a proven analytic procedure. Cross-case interpretation aided in developing naturalistic generalizations, or “what is ‘learned’” from the interpretation of the interview data (Creswell, 2013, p. 190). Naturalistic generalizations are broad conclusions pulled directly from the data that may be applied to other, similar populations of cases (Yin, 2009). Thus, the application of thematic analysis, in a framework of multiple case comparison, allowed for the determination of broadly applicable conclusions on the opportunities, challenges, and outcomes of utilizing Twitter for public relations practices.

In order to help confirm the accuracy of the thematic analysis of the interviews, member checking was employed. Member checking is the soliciting of feedback from participants to determine the credibility of the findings (Creswell, 1998). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checks are “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). The interviewees were sent copies of the data results and analysis, including tables and thematic description, in order to determine the accuracy of the reported interpretations. The affirmation of the interviewees provided authority to the analysis and reporting procedures.

**Content Analysis**

To determine the role of dialogic communication via social media for community non-profit organizations, the researcher used content analysis. More specifically, an
analysis of tweets from each organization was conducted in order to determine if the principles of dialogic communication were present (1) or absent (0) on the social media platform Twitter. The nature of this study and a majority of the previous studies dealing with dialogic communication through social media and social networking sites makes it appropriate to utilize the method of content analysis. The nature of Twitter, with its proliferation of information dissemination, encourages a form of analysis that can reduce the data to relevant information for interpretation. Content analysis is such a method, and allows a researcher to quantify concepts and analyze large amounts of text. According to Neuendorf (2002), “Content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages . . . and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented” (p. 10).

**Content analysis sampling.** Tweets for analysis were selected from a twelve-month time period between September 1, 2012 and August 31, 2013. Given that many non-profit organizations host yearly fundraisers or events in different months, the time period of a year was chosen. However, since within a year many organizations posted hundreds and possibly thousands of tweets, the researcher utilized systematic sampling. This means that tweets were chosen for analysis by a system of numbering (Saldaña, 2013). Due to the number of tweets from each organization, it was concluded that every $n$th tweet ($n$ was dependent on the total number of tweets per organization) would be analyzed to result in a final sample of 150 tweets per organization. This sampling process resulted in a total of 1200 tweets for analysis.
**Content analysis procedures.** As is appropriate for this study and for quantitative analysis, this study utilized a priori coding. A priori coding refers to the concept that the coding scheme is determined prior to the actual analysis. For this study, the coding was based on the dialogic theory of public relations. As previously discussed, Kent and Taylor (1998) described how the five principles of the dialogic theory of public relations were developed from the five main tenets of the theory. From there, Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) operationalized the five principles of dialogic communication in order to apply them to Twitter. These principles were ease of interface, usefulness of information, conservation of return visits, generation of return visits, and the dialogic loop. For the purposes of this study, these five principles were operationalized according to previous research as well as through their application to the purposes of non-profit organizations (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). There has been critique that social media has not been proven to facilitate dialogic communication, and therefore the characteristics of dialogic communication should not be operationalized for application to social media, such as Twitter (Taylor & Kent, 2008). Despite the criticism, the operationalization of dialogic communication for the context of social media has been utilized in many previous studies (Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2013; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Waters et al., 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011); therefore, for the benefit of comparison and applicability to the current field of knowledge, this study utilized the operationalization of dialogic communication for Twitter as set forth by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010).

**Ease of interface.** As was consistent with previous research, the first dialogic principle, ease of interface, was omitted from the content analysis (Bortree & Seltzer,
The reasoning behind this omission was that Twitter’s interface is consistent across profiles. As described by Kent and Taylor (1998), ease of interface refers to the ability of users to easily understand the utilization of the platform. In this case, users of Twitter who engage with non-profit organizations’ profiles would already be acquainted with the Twitter interface based on their previous use.

**Usefulness of information.** The next dialogic principle, usefulness of information, was operationalized according to the guidelines proposed by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010). In that study, previous research was utilized to determine the three main publics of for-profit organizations: media, investors, and customers (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). In order to apply this concept to non-profit organizations, the researcher equated investors to volunteers or donators, and customers to those who benefit from the non-profit organization’s service. Useful information as determined for these three publics include links to news releases, links to media rooms, video, audio, links to donation pages, links to volunteer pages, and links to a description of the non-profit organization and its services. Additional useful information for the general public included general links to the organization’s website, contact information such as email addresses and phone numbers, and links to other organizational social networking sites or blogs (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). Background or historical information on the organization, as well as any additional links to outside but applicable information were also considered useful (Kent & Taylor, 1998).
**Conservation of return visits.** Operationalization of the principle of conservation of return visits was based on the previous research conducted by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010). Conservation of return visits was determined to be a product of keeping visitors connected with the scope of the organization as well as the regularity or recency of the posts. Therefore, links to pages on the organization’s website, links to other social media platforms, links to an organizational blog, or links to a description of services were considered an application of this principle (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). However, the tweets were not coded for recency as described by Rybalko and Seltzer (2010), since recency and regularity of the posts was a condition of inclusion in this study.

**Generation of return visits.** Generation of return visits was operationalized through identifying features that would encourage visitors to return to the Twitter profile. Examples of this include links to pages that allow visitors to request further information and links to pages describing events. In addition, links to information on the organization in media and links to Frequently Asked Questions pages or discussion forums about the organizations were also considered indications of the principle of generation of return visits (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).

**Dialogic loop.** The final principle, the dialogic loop, refers to the ability of the organization to engage in relationship building interactions with stakeholders, such as discussions. Those functions of Twitter that stimulate dialogue, such as retweets and replies were included in the operationalization of this principle. In addition, the use of questions to elicit interaction with stakeholders was determined to be an indication of the principle of the dialogic loop (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010).
**Pilot test.** In order to determine the reliability of this original coding scheme, a pilot test was administered. All of the tweets (150) from one of the community non-profit organizations were coded in order to check for ambiguity or the need for revisions within the coding scheme. The coding scheme was utilized to determine whether the dialogic principles were present (1) or absent (0). For both the pilot study and the main study, two coders were utilized to ensure reliability. The coders both had previous experience with content analyses and had been briefed on the material pertinent to the case. Intercoder reliability, or the amount of agreement among two or more coders, was assessed during the pilot study to determine whether the coders encountered problems or if adjustments needed to be made to meet reliability standards. In case of disagreement, the coders discussed their findings until a mutual decision was reached. In addition, the coders addressed any changes or additions that needed to be made. For this analysis, intercoder reliability was using Cohen’s kappa, where \( k = 0.836 \), which exceeds the widely acceptable standard (Neuendorff, 2002). After the original pilot test and the ensuing revisions to the coding process, the two coders performed the full study of 1200 tweets.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine community non-profit organizations’ use of social media for public relations through the lens of the dialogic theory of public relations as set forth by Kent and Taylor (2002). This study examined eight community non-profit organizations through both interviews and a content analysis of their Twitter feeds. Each non-profit organization was analyzed through one interview with a public relations practitioner from the organization and a content analysis of 150 of the organization’s tweets. The inclusion of both interviews and content analysis for all eight cases allowed for the comparison of interpretations of use to the actual use of social media for public relations purposes at the non-profit organizations collectively.

Interviews

The respondent interviews were conducted to determine the interpretations and motivations for use of social media for public relations purposes as described by a social media practitioner at each community non-profit organization. These interviews were designed to answer the first three research questions, which include discovering the opportunities, challenges, and outcomes associated with public relations strategy via social media for non-profit organizations. The interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis in order to determine the most prominent patterns across the multiple cases. Themes emerged from this cross-case comparison, specifically four themes of opportunities and four themes of challenges associated with social media use for public
relations in the non-profit sector. See Table 1, below, for the eight main themes derived from the interviews.

Table 1

*Interview Analysis Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low cost tool</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time consuming tool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information sharing for education and awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Privacy and confidentiality concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to a wider, younger audience</td>
<td></td>
<td>Doesn’t reach traditional support base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real-time conversation and engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td>Open to negative reactions or response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RQ1.** The first research question asked how do public relations practitioners interpret the opportunities of using social media for community non-profit organizations’ public relations? Four themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews that answer this question. Each theme addressed an opportunity afforded to an organization by using social media for public relations. These themes include social media being a low cost tool, providing a platform for education and awareness, providing an expanded audience, and supporting real-time conversation and engagement. Table 2, below, expounds on the themes through exemplar respondent statements.
Table 2

**Themes Relating to Opportunities Provided by Social Media Use**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Exemplar Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low-cost tool</td>
<td>“We can, without spending a great deal of money, reach out and get our message across”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It is a low cost way to reach out to those who have an interest in you”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“When its not costly, non-profits have to pay attention . . . money, its limited, and you have to be good stewards of your resources”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and awareness</td>
<td>“So our social media fits in that goal, to let the community know that we are here, what we are all about”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>“In terms of getting information out, its huge . . .I think it helps to gain awareness”</td>
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<td>Wider, younger Audience</td>
<td>“The generation that we see today, the up and coming supporters . . . they want things to be technology driven”</td>
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<td>“I think it is very heartening to know you have access to basically anyone if you can draw them in”</td>
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<td>“I think it definitely attracts a younger demographic. And maybe not even attracts it, just makes us more relevant to a younger demographic”</td>
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<td>Real-time conversation and engagement</td>
<td>“It really just keeps us present in peoples lives, in a way that is more casual, more of a conversation, like oh we’re still here and here’s what we’ve got going on now”</td>
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<td>“The individuals that are engaged with you on that site have a vested interest and you can take them and engage more proactively and in a meaningful way”</td>
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<td>“I do think there is a conversation, and there is a conversation that wouldn’t be happening if social media didn’t exist”</td>
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Low-cost tool. One theme addressing opportunities afforded by social media use was that it is a low cost tool. The respondents made comments such as, “We can, without spending a great deal of money, reach out and get our message across”. The interviewees discussed how a social media platform, such as Twitter, was an inexpensive tool for public relations. Another respondent commented that, “It [social media] is a low cost way to reach out to those who have an interest in you”. Specifically, respondents discussed how it was especially important for non-profit organizations, which have limited resources, to utilize inexpensive yet effective tools. One respondent indicated this by stating, “When it’s not costly, non-profits have to pay attention . . . money, it’s limited, and you have to be good stewards of your resources”.

Education and awareness. The opportunity to offer information to educate or make the audience aware of a cause or organization was another theme that emerged from the interviews. Some respondents commented on the ability to use social media to educate the community on a cause or services of the non-profit organizations. Comments from the interviewees included, “I think it is educating the local community on what we are doing every day” and “So our social media fits in that goal, to let the community know that we are here, what we are all about”. Respondents also stated that social media gave non-profit organizations an opportunity to create awareness around an issue. One social media practitioner stated, “In terms of getting information out, it’s huge . . .I think it helps to gain awareness”.

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**Broader and younger audience.** A third theme derived from the interviews that related to the opportunities made available through the use of social media for public relations was that it offers a broader and demographically younger audience for the non-profit organizations to leverage. One respondent commented that, “I think it definitely attracts a younger demographic. And maybe not even attracts it, just makes us more relevant to a younger demographic” while another stated, “I think it is very heartening to know you have access to basically anyone if you can draw them in”. In addition to commenting on the ability of social media to reach a wider and younger audience, the respondents also remarked on the necessity of utilizing avenues that are attractive to a younger audience, such as social media. Example statements include: “The generation that we see today, the up and coming supporters . . . they want things to be technology driven”; “Its important to get younger people involved that way [on social media] . . . if they’ve already made that connection . . . it’ll be easier to establish that connection later”; and “This generation is technology driven . . . they want to be able to look online, so everything is being driven with this generation to the social media outlet”.

**Real-time conversation and engagement.** The final theme related to the opportunities available through social media was the ability of the non-profit organizations to be present in a real-time conversation and to engage with their audience. Many respondents discussed the availability of a conversation through social media with comments such as, “I do think there is a conversation, and there is a conversation that wouldn’t be happening if social media didn’t exist” and “It really just keeps us present in
peoples lives, in a way that is more casual, more of a conversation, like oh we’re still here and here’s what we’ve got going on now”. In addition to creating the opportunity for conversation, the participants disclosed that social media allows for engagement and creating connections. Interviewees said, “I think social media lets you have a conversation with people who are invested in you . . . they already have some sort of relationship with [organization A] when we talk to them” and “The individuals that are engaged with you on that site have a vested interest and you can take them and engage more proactively and in a meaningful way”.

RQ2. The second research question asked how do public relations practitioners interpret the challenges of using social media for community non-profit organizations’ public relations? The interview analysis yielded four themes that addressed this question. Each theme related to the challenges of using social media for public relations. These themes include social media being a time consuming tool, creating issues of privacy and confidentiality, not reaching the traditional support base for non-profit organizations, and being open to negative reactions and responses. Table 3 expounds on the themes through exemplar respondent statements.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Challenges</th>
<th>Exemplar Quotes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Time-consuming</td>
<td>“To use it [social media] well, it takes time”</td>
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<td>“There is a tremendous amount of time to be invested to do social media well . . . but in non-profits . . . manpower is often stretched pretty thin as it is”</td>
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<td>“It’s a good tool, but you have to put some thought into it, its time intensive”</td>
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<td>Privacy and confidentiality</td>
<td>“I mean client and volunteer confidentiality is always important, so when we post a quote from somebody, we don’t use their full name, that kind of thing”</td>
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<td>concerns</td>
<td>“Its really important to honor that confidentiality, and its really hard to balance that in smaller communities”</td>
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<td>“The dialogue . . . and feeds that are going to talk about autism or therapy, we have to be so cautious about stepping in to that . . .we are talking about the treatment of someone”</td>
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<td>Doesn’t reach traditional support base</td>
<td>“I mean our 87 year old Monday volunteer isn’t on Facebook or Twitter, so if we don’t continue to send . . . more traditional marketing stuff, we will miss them”</td>
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<td>“The older generation, which is a big part of our contributors now, is what we call old-school, where they like to get a piece of mail . . . they want a phone call”</td>
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<td>“A lot of our volunteers are retirees who are not on social media, we have a lot of donors who don’t do that [social media]”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Open to negative reactions or responses</td>
<td>“A lot of times, it’s to clean up messes, [because] people complain on Twitter”</td>
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<td>“There is no such thing as an interest or action that doesn’t have its opponents, so you have to watch what kind of arguments or hairsplitting you let get started”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Not everyone is going to be happy with you twenty-four seven . . . [and] I don’t want people to miss our message based on what someone else might post”</td>
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</table>
**Time-consuming tool.** A prominent theme relating to the challenges of utilizing social media for public relations purposes was that it is time-consuming. One social media practitioner stated, “It’s a good tool, but you have to put some thought into it, its time intensive”. In addition, some interviewees remarked on the time investment needed for social media use and its impact on the limited manpower available to a non-profit organization. One social media practitioner commented that “There is a tremendous amount of time to be invested to do social media well . . . but in non-profits . . . manpower is often stretched pretty thin as it is”. Another interviewee stated that “A lot of time [is] eaten from the people who handle it [social media]”.

**Privacy and confidentiality concerns.** A second theme of challenges was that non-profit organizations using social media for public relations purposes brings up concerns of privacy and confidentiality. Many respondents commented on the importance of confidentiality in relation to social media by stating things such as “I mean client and volunteer confidentiality is always important, so when we post a quote from somebody, we don’t use their full name, that kind of thing” and “Its really important to honor that confidentiality, and its really hard to balance that in smaller communities”. Another privacy concern related to social media is that non-profit organizations can be associated with sensitive issues or disadvantaged people, which the organizations should be cautious about discussing via social media. One respondent addressed this issue for his or her specific organization by saying, “The dialogue . . . and feeds that are going to talk about autism or therapy, we have to be so cautious about stepping in to that . . . we are talking about the treatment of someone”.
Overlooks traditional support base. Not reaching the traditional support base of non-profit organizations was a third theme related to the challenges of using social media for public relations purposes. The interviewees disclosed that the traditional support base for non-profit organizations has aged and includes many retirees. One interviewee remarked that many traditional supporters appreciate traditional mediums of communication, the statement was “The older generation, which is a big part of our contributors now, is what we call old-school, where they like to get a piece of mail . . . they want a phone call”. In addition, respondents explained that many of those in the traditional support base for non-profit organizations do not use social media. Comments included, “I mean our 87 year old Monday volunteer isn’t on Facebook or Twitter, so if we don’t continue to send . . . more traditional marketing stuff, we will miss them” and “A lot of our volunteers are retirees who are not on social media, we have a lot of donors who don’t do that”.

Negative responses and reactions. The final theme related to the challenges of utilizing social media for public relations purposes was that it is open to negative responses and reactions. One respondent explained the vulnerability to negativity via social media by stating, “people complain on Twitter”. The social media practitioners also commented on the fact that social media is a platform available to anyone, and since it is impossible to please everyone non-profit organizations should be aware of the possibility of opposition online. Example comments to support this argument include: “There is no such thing as an interest or action that doesn’t have its opponents, so you have to watch what kind of arguments or hairsplitting you let get started” and “Not
everyone is going to be happy with you twenty-four seven . . . [and] I don’t want people to miss our message based on what someone else might post”.

RQ3. The third research question asked how do public relations practitioners interpret the outcomes of community non-profit organizations’ public relations via social media? To answer this question, the interviews were analyzed and specific outcomes mentioned were collected. Respondents mentioned a wide range of the outcomes of utilizing social media for public relations purposes at their non-profit organizations.

Some of the non-profit public relations practitioners reported positive outcomes to using social media, such as physical donations or recruitment of volunteers. For example, one respondent remarked, “It has brought in some donations, but it tends to be very crisis oriented I think”, while another also stated, “We’ve certainly gotten people who have volunteered or come to events based on that [social media]”. In addition to commenting on the tangible benefits of social media use, respondents also addressed the connections that have been made that provide a support network within their stakeholders. One practitioner remarked, “It’s about growing our membership base, program participation, but it’s also about connecting our members . . . that’s the biggest outcome, you know, connecting people”. Another respondent said, “I know when I share a story with someone or of someone and that person gets feedback from the community, I know . . . that that is a source of support, you know, emotional support”. An additional positive outcome that was described was having increased exposure, with one respondent commenting, “I think there is a lot more name recognition than we would have otherwise achieved”.

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Although many of the outcomes that the respondents reported were positive, some qualifications to those outcomes were also discussed. The limitations associated with the outcomes of social media use for public relations purposes was that the respondents did not believe that the return on investment for social media was calculable. Comments on this include: “That’s a challenge with social media . . . you can compare activity to trends . . . but there are many other things in there. There are so many other variables . . . that said, there is certainly anecdotal evidence that it [social media] has played a part in success” and “I don’t have measurements. I mean, I can measure likes and comments, but I can’t necessarily see the impact . . . does that make someone reach out and help a neighbor . . . I don’t know, [but] I hope so”. In addition, some respondents associated the inability to measure the benefits of social media to their being a lack of positive outcomes. One respondent said, “It [social media] doesn’t compute to funds for a non-profit, and for us its all about where is our support coming from”. Another public relations practitioner also commented on the lack of donations through social media by stating, “We do not see it necessarily translating to lifetime donors who give and come in and engage with the organization to stay”.

Content Analysis

In addition to discovering social media practitioners’ perceptions on using social media for public relations purposes in the non-profit sector, this study also addressed the dialogic principles as set forth by Kent and Taylor (1998) as they are employed on Twitter. In order to answer this last research question, a content analysis was conducted. The analysis consisted of coding 150 tweets per organization. Therefore, 1200 tweets
were coded for the different criteria associated with the four dialogic principles: usefulness of information, conversation of visitors, generation of return visits, and the dialogic loop. The tweets were not mutually exclusive, more than one dialogic principle could be found in each post.

**RQ4.** The fourth research question asked how do community non-profit organizations use dialogic communication, as described in the dialogic theory of public relations, to connect with stakeholders via the social media platform Twitter? This question was answered in multiple steps, through the percentages of each dialogic principle, the percentages of each criteria utilized, and through the comparison of the use of the dialogic principles between the nationally affiliated and local non-profit organizations. The most general results showed the percentage of each dialogic principle, which was found by adding the total number of tweets that each dialogic principle was present in and dividing it by the total number of tweets. Figure 1 shows the frequency with which each dialogic principle was used throughout the total number of tweets. The principles were not mutually exclusive, and therefore one tweet may have been coded to include more than one principle, and multiple criteria within each principle. Usefulness of information was the most often utilized dialogic principle, appearing in 59.8% of the 1200 tweets analyzed. An example tweet which uses the principle of usefulness of information was “Check out the new F.I.T. Center at the Adams Mill Program Center in Simpsonville. Open house tonight from 6-8 p.m.”. Conservation of visitors was the second most utilized principle, appearing in 53.2% of the tweets. An example tweet was “I posted 9 photos on Facebook album ‘Thanksgiving Day Volunteers’
The next most utilized principle was the dialogic loop with 35.3%. An example was “@TheRoeZ Thanks for spreading the word!!”. The least utilized dialogic principle was the generation of return visitors, which appeared in 23.3% of the tweets. Finally, an example tweet was “Only TWO MORE WEEKS until the [organization event]! Get your registration in now before we run out of start times. ow.ly/dlCRh”.

Figure 1. Percent of Dialogic Principles Used in Total Tweets

To further answer the research question, the frequency of each criterion used within each principle was analyzed. The first principle was usefulness of information. The criteria for this principle include links to outside sources, providing company information, contact information, information on services, or providing informative photos or videos. See Appendix C for examples of each criterion. The most commonly
used criterion was links to outside sources, appearing in 61.6% of the usefulness of information tweets. Information on services was the second most common criterion with 36.6%. The remaining three criteria were company information (20.3%), informative photos and videos (6.8%) and contact information (2.9%).

Figure 2 shows the frequencies for each criterion within the total number of tweets in which the principle of usefulness of information was present.

![Percentage of Criteria used in Usefulness of Information](image)

**Figure 2. Percentage of Criteria used in Usefulness of Information**

The second principle was conservation of visitors. The criteria for this principle include links to the organization’s website, links to the organization’s other social media, and requesting the audience to follow. See Appendix C for examples of each criterion.

Figure 3 shows the frequencies for each criterion within the total number of tweets in which the principle of conservation of visitors was present. The most frequently used
criterion was by far providing links to the other social media sites of an organization (90.6%). Links to the organizations website and requesting the audience to follow were used in 10.7% and 0.5% of the conservation of visitors tweets respectively.

![Percentage of Criteria used in Conservation of Visitors](image)

**Figure 3. Percentage of Criteria used in Conservation of Visitors**

The third principle was generation of return visits. The criteria for this principle include links to event pages, links to outside media sources, links to volunteer or donation pages, requesting the audience to retweet, providing engaging photos or videos, and conducting contests. See Appendix C for examples of each criterion. The most frequently utilized criterion within generation of return visitors was links to event pages at 39.1%, with links to donation or volunteer pages a close second at 34.4%. The least utilized criteria were conducting contests (2.9%) and requesting retweets (2.5%). The other criteria links to outside new media and engaging photos and videos were utilized 17.6%
and 10.4% respectively. Figure 4 shows the frequencies for each criterion within the total number of tweets in which the principle of generation of return visits was present.

![Percentage of Criteria used in Generation of Return Visits](image)

**Figure 4. Percentage of Criteria used in Generation of Return Visitors**

The final principle was the dialogic loop. The criteria for this principle include requesting a response from the audience, retweeting an outside source, and mentioning or replying to a user. See Appendix C for examples of each criterion. Figure 5 shows the percentages for each criterion within the total number of tweets in which the principle of the dialogic loop was present. The most frequently utilized criterion was mentioning or replying to a user with 66.4% of the tweets. Requesting a response was second most frequent at 33.6%, and retweeting information occurred in 23.6% of the dialogic loop tweets.
Figure 5. Percentage of Criteria used in the Dialogic Loop

While the investigation into all eight of the non-profit organizations’ use of dialogic communication on Twitter yielded useful information, a comparison of the nationally affiliated and local non-profits was also investigated. The qualitative interviews yielded data that suggested a comparison between the nationally affiliated and locally based non-profit organizations would yield significant statistical differences in their use of Twitter. The distinctions between the organization structure and employee base of the two groups led to the comparison of the usage of dialogic communication between the nationally affiliated and local non-profit organizations. In addition, since there is a difference in the professional experience utilizing social media between the public relations practitioners at the nationally affiliated organizations versus the local non-profit organizations, it was deemed appropriate to compare the use of the dialogic
principles between the two types of organizations. The comparison led to emergent findings.

Four independent sample t-tests were conducted to compare the usage of each dialogic principle—usefulness of information, conservation of visitors, generation of return visits, and the dialogic loop—between nationally affiliated and local non-profit organizations. There was a significant difference in the use of the usefulness of information criteria between local non-profit organizations ($M=0.38, SD=0.49$) and nationally affiliated non-profit organizations ($M=0.81, SD=0.39$), $t(1144.90) = -16.73$, $p< .05$. Nationally affiliated non-profit organizations utilized significantly more usefulness of information criteria within their tweets than local non-profit organizations.

There was also a significant difference in the use of the conservation of visitors criteria between local non-profit organizations ($M=0.70, SD=0.46$) and nationally affiliated non-profit organizations ($M=0.36, SD=0.48$), $t(1195.28) = 12.26$, $p< .05$. Local non-profit organizations utilized the criteria for the principle of conservation of visitors significantly more than nationally affiliated non-profit organizations.

In addition, there was a significant difference in the use of the generation of return visits criteria between local non-profit organizations ($M=0.20, SD=0.40$) and nationally affiliated non-profit organizations ($M=0.26, SD=0.44$), $t(1187.74) = -2.53$, $p< .05$. This means that the nationally affiliated non-profit organizations’ tweets displayed more of the criteria for the dialogic principle of generation of return visits than those of the local non-profit organizations.
Finally, there was also a significant difference in the use of the dialogic loop criteria between local non-profit organizations ($M=0.27$, $SD=0.45$) and nationally affiliated non-profit organizations ($M=0.43$, $SD=0.49$), $t(1185.45) = -5.69$, $p<.05$. Local non-profit organizations utilized the dialogic loop criteria significantly less than the nationally affiliated non-profit organizations.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

Non-profit organizations rely heavily on the support of stakeholders, whether they are volunteers, donors, a member of the media, or a potential beneficiary. The connection between a non-profit organization and its community of stakeholders is developed through the public relations practices employed by the organization. If communication is dialogic, according to public relations best practices, the organization will build successful relationships with its stakeholders. Social media has become a significant part of communication, and is therefore an important communication channel for non-profit organizations to acknowledge and utilize for the development of these stakeholder relationships. The implementation of social media for public relations purposes, the opportunities and challenges it presents, impact the actual utilization of social media as platforms for dialogic communication.

This thesis investigated eight community non-profit organizations through interviews and content analyses of tweets informed by the dialogic principles as presented by Kent and Taylor (1998). The multi-case study allowed for four research questions to be addressed, revealing the relationship between what practitioners interpret as the motivations for using social media for public relations and the actual implementation of social media for public relations purposes in the non-profit sector.

The objective of this thesis was to investigate the use of social media for non-profit organizations public relations through the interpretations of social media practitioners. In order to explore this line of inquiry, both qualitative and quantitative
analyses were conducted. The interviews, in which social media practitioners answered questions on social media integration into public relations for non-profit organizations, yielded interesting results that shed light on the adoption of social media throughout the non-profit sector. These interviews resulted in eight overarching themes that, along with the results of the quantitative content analysis, produced insight into the public relations practices of community non-profit organizations.

**Low-cost Tool**

The eight themes that were discovered in the interviews include four themes of opportunities and four themes of challenges in relation to utilizing social media for the public relations of non-profit organizations. The first opportunity theme related to the fact that social media is a low-cost tool. Many of the respondents indicated that because social media was inexpensive, it could greatly benefit a non-profit organization. Non-profit organizations, by their nature do not have large budgets, and therefore should pay attention when an inexpensive medium for communication is available. They should follow the advice of one of the respondents, who said, “you have to be good stewards of your resources”. Therefore, non-profits should leverage a free communication platform such as social media. It has previously been speculated that non-profit organizations may not have adopted other communication technologies in the past because of lack of funds for staffing or development (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). However, because social media are free platforms for communication, they overcome some of those former arguments against adopting new communication technology.
Education and Awareness

Another theme of opportunity that has implications for the use of social media in the non-profit sector was the idea that social media is used by non-profit organizations to educate the community and build awareness around a cause. This qualitative theme is supported by the results of the content analysis that indicated that usefulness of information was the most prominent dialogic principle, appearing in 59.8% of the 1200 tweets analyzed. Criteria for usefulness of information included company information, contact information, links to outside sources, and other pertinent information an organization might want to share with its publics. Although these results are consistent, education and awareness information sharing is reflective of information dissemination, or one-way communication. Unidirectional public relations efforts are not viewed by some as being as effective as two-way dialogic public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 2008). However, it has been argued that providing information, such as information on the mission, history, services, and financials of an organization can promote connection with stakeholders through building trust (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) also argue that sharing information provides a basis that is needed in order for dialogue to emerge. Therefore, although it should not be the ultimate goal, education and awareness through information sharing is an important aspect of using social media for public relations.

Broader and Younger Audience

The third theme of opportunity was that social media provides a broader and younger audience than traditional media. Social media is widely used among the younger
generations. The most active social media users are between the ages of 18 and 29, with 89% of online users in that age bracket utilizing at least one social media site (Brenner & Smith, 2013). In addition, this demographic is the most likely group to use the social media platform Twitter. It is also important to note that 67% of online adults are on social media (Brenner, 2012). Through social media, there is a large population available with which non-profit organizations can interact. In addition, it is noted in the interviews that engaging a younger audience can lead to long term connections through which non-profit organizations can leverage donations and volunteers. Non-profit organizations would be remiss to ignore a medium of communication such as social media, which can potentially increase the impact of a public relations strategy.

**Real-time Conversation and Engagement**

The fourth theme of opportunity relates directly to the public relations best practice of developing dialogue and building relationships. The non-profit public relations practitioners indicated that social media was a beneficial tool for connecting with stakeholders and being a part of the conversation. Despite that the practitioners discussed the importance and availability of engagement and conversation on social media, the actual use of social media for dialogue was not prominent for these eight organizations. Instead, the dialogic loop, which is the dialogic principle through which organizations respond and connect to other social media users, was the second to least used principle within the tweets. Only 35.3% of the 1200 tweets included a criteria indicative of creating a dialogue. The frequency of the dialogic loop in comparison to the 59.8% presence of usefulness of information indicates that information dissemination is
more of a priority for these eight non-profit organizations than building dialogue. However, it should be noted that the frequency of the principle of the dialogic loop in this study is consistent with previous research, such as Linvill, McGee, and Hicks (2013) in which the dialogic loop was coded in 29.6% of the analyzed tweets from colleges and universities. In addition, while in previous research retweets were the most prominent criterion present in the posts coded for the dialogic loop, in the current study 66.4% of the dialogic loop tweets included mentions or replies, which could indicate more active engagement. However, these results still indicate that despite public relations practitioners for the eight community non-profit organizations understanding the need for dialogue and interaction, that knowledge is not being leveraged in current social media use.

Despite the public relations practitioners indications that social media facilitates conversation and engagement it should be noted that the dialogic capabilities of social media have been questioned. Taylor and Kent (2010) discuss that there is no solid evidence that social media can facilitate dialogic communication. However, there are benefits to utilizing the principles of dialogic communication to investigate public relations strategy for social media. Dialogic communication is commonly used to investigate public relations strategies, therefore utilizing dialogic communication for analysis allows for comparison to previous research. In addition, since there is not a better alternative for investigating public relations via social media, dialogic communication is the appropriate analytic framework.
The four themes related to the challenges of utilizing social media for public relations purposes also yielded significant insight into the public relations practices of non-profit organizations. One prominent theme was that utilizing social media for public relations was time consuming. This concept of a large time investment being needed for social media implementation has been addressed before. Briones et al. (2011), after conducting a study on the social media usage of the American Red Cross discussed the idea that one of the largest obstacles to using social media for public relations was the availability of resources, both personnel and time.

This theme of social media being time-consuming can be further explained through the comparison of nationally affiliated non-profit organizations’ and local organizations’ use of the dialogic principles. The nationally affiliated non-profits were found to have more professionally experienced social media practitioners as well as being more likely than local non-profit organizations to have a staff member dedicated to public relations or social media. Nationally affiliated non-profit organizations generally had more staff than local non-profits, as well as local non-profit organizations’ staff members tended to have a variety of responsibilities or shared responsibilities. The typical staffing for a nationally affiliated non-profit organization includes Since this means that nationally affiliated non-profit organizations are more likely to have more resources in terms of staff and time, therefore they should be shown to be more strategic in their social media use. Nationally affiliated non-profit organizations utilized significantly more of the
criteria for the principles of usefulness of information, generation of return visits, and the
dialogic loop than local non-profits. This finding supports an argument that the more time
an organization can allocate to social media, the more strategic the public relations
strategy will be.

**Privacy and Confidentiality Concerns**

Maintaining confidentiality and privacy on social media was another challenge
that the respondents discussed. There are many different types of non-profit
organizations, with a wide range of causes to support. Anything from environmental
issues to mental health can be the focus of a non-profit organization (Spencer, 2002).
Some of these non-profit organizations deal with sensitive, often confidential
information, and should therefore be wary of what they share on social media. Non-profit
organizations that deal with sensitive information should potentially take extra
precautions to protect the confidentiality of its stakeholders and beneficiaries. In order to
overcome this challenge, it could be beneficial for non-profit organizations to determine
rules and regulations for social media use to help protect sensitive information. Overall,
social media should not be discounted by non-profit organizations; however, the
utilization may be different and potentially more cautious, depending on the nature of the
organization.

**Overlooks Traditional Support Base**

Another challenge to non-profit organizations utilizing social media for public
relations that emerged from the interviews was that social media is not the most effective
medium with which to connect to the traditional support base for the non-profit sector.
Many of the non-profit organizations included in this study indicated that the traditional supporters of non-profits are older, perhaps retirees. According to the respondents, the older demographic are those who are currently volunteering and donating to support community non-profit organizations. In addition, it was acknowledged that this traditional support base appreciates more traditional mediums of communication. However, it must be noted that 60% of online adults aged 50-64 use at least one social media site. Individuals 65 years or older are the fastest growing demographic in adopting social media, with the number tripling in the last four years (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Therefore, although social media may not be a traditional medium of public relations communication, this may be a tradition that is changing. In addition to social media becoming increasingly more popular with the older demographics, it should also be stated that young people who actively engage with social media will in the future be in the demographic of traditional supporters. Therefore, it may be beneficial to begin interacting with stakeholders who are young and cultivating those relationships for support in the future.

**Negative Responses and Reactions**

A final challenge of utilizing social media for public relations purposes is that it allows for negative reactions and responses. Social media is an open medium of communication, which means it is a method of communication for both proponents and opponents. Negative responses are common in the realm of social media, and are often not even based in fact (Ormazabal, 2014). Despite its prevalence in social media, negative reactions and responses can be present in almost any communication medium.
Social media negativity, however, can be distributed immediately. This vulnerability to negative interactions on social media is an example of the tenet of risk associated with dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Although social media allows for negative reactions, it also allows for immediate responses to those reactions and to any potential complaints or problems brought forward. The immediacy of social media can help non-profit organizations to control and manage negative backlash (Ormazabal, 2014).

Another finding from this study that is significant for understanding the use of social media for non-profit organizations’ public relations purposes relates to the outcomes as interpreted by the social media practitioners from the eight organizations. The respondents indicated that although there are positive outcomes from utilizing social media for public relations, they are qualified by the fact that it is difficult to measure the outcomes of social media use. There is no traditional return on investment associated with social media because there are many factors that can affect supporters’ behavior. Therefore, because social media cannot be isolated as the sole impetus for specific financial donations or volunteer work, the outcomes are deemed to be adverse to measurement. However, this issue has been addressed in marketing and public relations press, and has been refuted. It is being argued that traditional return on investment cannot apply to social media, and therefore social media practitioners should approach the measurement of impact differently. Instead of looking for financial returns, social media success should be measured through the investment a stakeholder makes in developing a relationship via social media (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). Focusing on the stakeholders and
their engagement would allow an organization to focus on the two-way relationship with their supporters that will benefit in the long term instead of focusing solely on short-term monetary gains (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010). This focus on both sides of the public relations interaction reflects the dialogic tenets of mutuality, which advocates for equality between the participants in a dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

Comparison

It is important to compare qualitative and quantitative data to explore if practitioners thoughts and beliefs are consistent with practice. This study sought to expand beyond previous research, which found that dialogic principles were not being utilized efficiently via social media (Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2013; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Waters et al., 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011). In order to provide insight, interviews with public relations practitioners were included in this mixed method study. The comparison of the results of the interviews with the results of the content analysis were meant to reveal the differences in what practitioners interpreted as the use of social media for public relations and the actual use of social media for community non-profit organizations.

The content analysis of the dialogic principles for this study showed similar results to previous studies in that usefulness of information was the most frequently utilized dialogic principle. Implications of the utilization of usefulness of information are, in this study, that Twitter is being utilized for more one-way communication, or what is called information dissemination. The theme of education and awareness corroborated these results. Respondents indicated that social media were tools for educating their
publics or making them aware of issues. These interactions are related to information dissemination in that education and awareness building do not require feedback and are therefore not focused on relationship building, which is promoted as a public relations best practice. As previously discussed, information dissemination is not considered a best practice for public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 2008); therefore, these results indicate that community non-profit organizations are not efficiently utilizing the dialogic capabilities of Twitter.

Another theme worthy of further analysis is the theme of real-time conversation and engagement. This theme indicates that public relations practitioners for community non-profit organizations understand the potential for relationship building that Twitter, and other social media platforms, provides. Respondents specifically indicate that there are opportunities to interact and be a part of a conversation. Despite this acknowledgement, the content analysis of the non-profit organizations’ tweets reveals that there is a lack of utilization of the dialogic principle that supports conversation, the dialogic loop. The dialogic loop was the second to least utilized principle with only 35.3% of the 1200 tweets including criteria indicative of creating a dialogue. The lack of use of the dialogic loop along with the practitioner acknowledgement of the possibility of engagement and conversation suggests that while the organizations understand the need for conversation, there is a lack of implementation. That lack of implementation could stem from the challenges that the qualitative analysis also revealed, such as social media being time-consuming and open to negativity.
Practical Utility

In addition to providing insight into the interpretations behind the opportunities and challenges of utilizing social media for public relations purposes, this study also revealed potential for practical utility. While most studies aim at furthering knowledge within a field, it could be beneficial for studies such as this to also provide suggestions for actual implementation of social media public relations strategy. Public relations is a dynamic field that could benefit from the practical suggestions that come to light during academic investigation. For the community non-profit organizations included in this study, some suggestions on maximizing the use of criteria of the dialogic loop—such as replies and soliciting responses through questions—could improve the possibility for dialogue and relationship building. In addition, generation of return visitors was the least utilized dialogic principle, which could impact the possibilities of raising funds or acquiring volunteers through Twitter. The criteria for generation of return visitors focuses on links to event pages or pages for donating and volunteering. If there is a lack of information and connection to these sites, there could be a lack of connecting with these stakeholders.

Other suggestions for practical utility could come from the comparison of nationally affiliated and locally based non-profit organizations. Nationally affiliated non-profit organizations utilized significantly more of the criteria of the dialogic principles than the locally based non-profit organizations. In addition, the nationally affiliated organizations tended to have public relations practitioners with professional experience utilizing social media, as well as more distinct social media strategy. Non-profit
organizations associated with a national level were more likely to have established best practices and support for their social media outreach. Along with the results of the comparison, this suggests there is a potential for locally based non-profit organizations to improve public relations via social media through increased training or strategy. In addition, this could benefit the non-profit community at large, by suggesting the establishment of strategy and best practices to guide social media use.

Overall, both the qualitative interviews and the quantitative content analysis help to reveal possible suggestions for practical application. The respondents indicated what were the most important uses of social media for community non-profit organizations, while the content analysis revealed what was actually being utilized on Twitter. Suggestions for implementation and best uses of different aspects of Twitter, and potentially other social media, can be made based on these results.

Limitations

Although the results of this study yielded beneficial information for the field of public relations, there are limitations to its utility and application. The most prominent limitation to the current study is the sample size. While a cross-case study of eight community non-profit organizations yields significant insight into the use of social media for public relations, the generalizability of these results should be explored further. In addition to being limited to eight non-profit organizations, this study also only included one interview per organization. While at some organizations this interview comprised the entire public relations staff, it was not the case at all organizations, particularly the nationally affiliated organizations. It could have been beneficial if all of the employees
associated with social media implementation at each organization had been interviewed. This would have provided additional substantiation for the claims made about these eight organizations.

Another limitation of this study that is related to the sample is the potential influence of the geographic location of the eight organizations. All eight were located in the same region of the southeastern United States, and their public relations practices could be informed by the community practices associated with this specific region. Therefore, although the study yielded interesting results on the public relations practices of community non-profit organizations, the specific applicability of the results could be limited to similar organizations in the same region.

A final limitation stemming from the sample size is the inability to apply the results of the independent samples t-test to the general population of non-profit organizations. These analyses compared only four nationally affiliated non-profit organizations to four local non-profit organizations. While the results of the comparison apply to these specific organizations, the implications on the field of public relations should be treated with caution. The potential generalizability of such a limited comparison is compelling, but uncertain.

This study was also limited in that the content analysis of the social media of the community non-profit organizations only included one social media platform, Twitter. Although Twitter is lauded as the most interactive social media platform, and therefore potentially the most conducive to dialogue, in order to have a full understanding of social media’s application to non-profit organizations’ public relations, it would have been
beneficial to compare the dialogic communication on all social media channels utilized by each organization, such as Facebook, Google +, Pinterest, or Instagram.

In addition to issues of sample size and limited data collection, there exists a large limitation to this study in that it has been proposed that the dialogic theory of public relations is not the best theory to apply to the study of social media. The theory was originally developed to analyze websites and was therefore operationalized for such uses (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002). Websites, while helpful tools of communication, are unlike social media and are not inherently interactive. There are not any existing theories or models specifically aimed at studying social media, and therefore a prior theory, such as the dialogic theory of public relations, was fitted to the context. While the implementation of the dialogic theory of public relations may not be ideal, it is still a useful means of categorizing data. Nonetheless, future research should explore the potential for a social media focused theory of public relations.

**Future Research**

In order to overcome the limitations of this current study, it would be beneficial to expand this study to a larger population. This would provide more generalizability to the study and allow for greater insight. A larger population could be gained through increasing the total number of organizations to be studied, as well as by including all of the social media practitioners at each organization. Since non-profit organizations have limited personnel, multiple people within one organization may share the responsibility of managing the social media accounts. Another way to expand the reach of this study would be to investigate more than Twitter in the investigation of the dialogic principles.
within non-profit organizations’ use of social media. Other social media sites, such as Instagram, Facebook, and Pinterest, should all be included in the study for a full examination of the use of social media by non-profit organizations.

Another potential future study could expand the comparison of nationally affiliated and local non-profit organizations. It has been suggested that non-profit organizations that network with their national affiliate organization benefit from the interaction through the sharing of knowledge and experience from the national organization to its branches (Spencer, 2002). In order to study the influence of national non-profit organizations’ on their branches, it would be necessary to increase the samples of both nationally affiliated and local non-profits.

Since dialogue is based on equal two-way communication, the inclusion of stakeholders’ perspectives as part of the research process could provide insight into the process of creating dialogue for public relations purposes via social media. Therefore, future research could include interviews not only with those who utilize social media professionally, but also with those who are interacting with an organization’s social media. As described by Kent and Taylor (1998) in their development of the dialogic theory of public relations, dialogue is an equal relationship and therefore the interpretations of those engaging with non-profit organizations are equally as important and valid as the social media practitioners.

Other future research studies could explore the influences of organizational structure on social media use. As discovered in this study, there are differences in the social media use of nationally affiliated and local non-profit organizations. Therefore, it
could be beneficial to investigate the impact of organizational structure, such as the national hub and regional branch structure, on the implementation and use of public relations strategy, such as the use of social media. In addition, the mission of the organization, and the level of privacy or confidentiality needed for that mission, may influence the structure and interactions of a non-profit organization. Since there are so many types of non-profit organizations, with different organizational structures based on their objective, it could be useful to explore the impact on social media use.

There are many possibilities for future research within the field of public relations via social media, especially within the non-profit sector. Although this study has expanded upon previous research on dialogic communication via social media, it is just a step along the path to understanding how to utilize social media for public relations. So much of the previous research has focused on determining the presence of dialogic principles instead of the motivations behind the potential use. The future of dialogic communication for public relations via social media should aim to develop deeper understanding of why and how social media supports each side of the dialogue.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the motivations for the use of social media for the public relations of non-profit organizations. Non-profit organizations have limited resources and should therefore try to capitalize on any tool that facilitates stakeholder communication. Social media has been lauded as a potentially effective outlet through which for-profit organizations connect with their publics. Despite this, it has been found that public relations best practices are not being utilized on social media, with many organizations performing one-way information dissemination rather than two-way relationship building conversation (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; McAllister & Taylor, 2007; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). These findings have held true in the non-profit sector as well. Non-profit organizations have been found to underutilize the dialogic capabilities of social media platforms (Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2012; Waters et al., 2009; Waters & Jamal, 2011).

Despite the range of research in which organizations were found to underutilize social media, there has been a lack of research into the intentions behind use. When analyzing the use of dialogic communication via social media by non-profit organizations, including the interpretations of social media use by public relations practitioners in the non-profit sector yielded great insight. Through both interviews with social media practitioners and content analysis of Twitter, the interpretations for use and the implementation of social media by non-profit organizations was investigated. Through the lens of the five principles of dialogic communication, as set forth by Kent and Taylor (1998), eight community non-profit organizations were analyzed and
compared in a multiple case study. Each case consisted of one interview and 150 tweets from a 12 month period.

Results were relatively consistent to previous research on the utilization of the dialogic principles via social media. Usefulness of information was the most prominent dialogic principle (59.8%) and while the dialogic loop was not the least frequent principle, its occurred in only 35.3% of the total tweets, only slightly increased from previous studies with Twitter (Linvill, McGee, & Hicks, 2013). While the dialogic principles were present in the tweets, there was not substantial evidence to support that dialogue was occurring between the organization and its stakeholders.

Although this investigation yielded many results, some of the most insightful came from the practitioner interviews. Eight themes relating to the opportunities and challenges presented by social media use for public relations were interpreted. These eight themes helped to build a deeper understanding of why social media is used for public relations as well as why it may not be used to its full dialogic potential.

Four themes of opportunities related the benefits of utilizing social media for public relations, while the four themes of challenges presented obstacles to social media use. These interpretations of use from social media practitioners expanded the understanding of social media and public relations practices for non-profit organizations. The practitioners recognize the ability of social media to facilitate conversation, however, the results indicate that information dissemination is still more prevalent. It is possible that the lack of resources at a non-profit organization encourages social media practitioners to employ information dissemination, which does not necessitate interaction,
but could potentially save time. In addition, although social media targets a broad and often more youthful audience, it can be concluded that other mediums for public relations should not be overlooked. The traditional support base for non-profit organizations may demand more traditional forms of communication. Therefore it would be useful for non-profit organizations to continue utilizing a variety of mediums in their public relations strategy.

Although broad generalizations cannot be made from these results, this thesis does open up new avenues for inquiry that will advance knowledge in both the field of public relations and the non-profit sector. More research is needed on the dialogic capabilities of social media, and the implications for public relations. The dialogic theory of public relations was originally developed for websites and should therefore be advanced further to support its application to social media. Social media has become ubiquitous within society, which has implications on its utility for public relations. While there are both benefits and detriments to its current application, future research should address the potential development of social media as a relationship building platform for public relations. As one respondent explained, “It behooves us to figure out the best ways to use it [social media]”
Appendix A

Interview Protocol I

1. Can you please state and spell your name.

2. What is your position within this organization?

3. What does (fill in organization name) do? What are the goals of the organization?

4. Who are you directing the message of your organization at?

5. How does your organization interact with the community?

6. Does your organization have a plan for its public relations?
   a. Is there a specific goal?
   b. Do you have a policy on public relations?

7. Do you utilize social media in your public relations strategy?
   a. How so?

8. How does social media contribute to your organizational goals?

9. Do you have a lot of experience using social media?
   a. Do you have a personal Twitter account?
   b. Do you use automated scheduling for your accounts?

10. How do you utilize Twitter within your organization?
    a. Examples of specific tweets. Is this typical use?

11. Does Twitter facilitate the goals of your organization?

12. How important do you think Twitter is for your organization?

13. Overall do you think Twitter and social media in general facilitates public relations?
14. Are there any obstacles to using Twitter and social media in general, for public relations purposes?

15. What do you see as the outcomes of using Twitter for public relations?

16. Do you see Twitter as a successful tool?

17. Does Twitter facilitate your organization’s interaction with the community?

Thank you for your time. I appreciate your participation.
Appendix B

Interview Protocol II

1. Can you please state and spell your name.

2. What is your position within this organization?

3. In your own words, what does (fill in organization name) do? What are the goals of the organization?

4. Who are you directing the message of your organization at?

5. How would you characterize your organization’s interaction with the community?

6. Does your organization have a plan for its public relations?
   a. Is there a specific goal?
   b. Do you have an official policy on public relations?

7. Do you utilize social media in your public relations strategy?
   a. How so?
   b. What other mediums of communication do you use?

8. How does social media contribute to your organizational goals?

9. Do you have professional experience using social media?
   a. Do you have personal accounts?
   b. On average, how much time do you spend on social media for your organization?

10. Overall do you think Twitter and social media in general facilitates public relations?
11. Are there any obstacles or problems with using Twitter and social media in general, for public relations purposes?

12. What outcomes do you see from using Twitter and social media for public relations?

13. How do you utilize Twitter within your organization?

14. Does Twitter facilitate the goals of your organization?

15. How important do you think Twitter is for your organization?

16. Do you see Twitter, or social media in general, as a successful tool?

17. Does social media facilitate your organization’s interaction with the community?

Thank you for your time. I appreciate your participation.
Appendix C

Code Book

Examples of each criterion:

A. Usefulness of Information

1A. Links to outside sources

2A. Company Information

3A. Contact Information
4A. Information on Services

5A. Photos/Videos

B. Conservation of Return Visits

1B. Links to Organization Website
2B. Links to Additional Social Networking Sites

3B. Request Audience to “Follow” on Twitter

C. Generation of Return Visits

1C. Links to event pages

2C. Links to donation/volunteer information

3C. Request Audience to “Retweet” (RT)
D. Dialogic Loop

1D. Request Audience to respond

2D. Organization “Retweet” (RT) of information

3D. Organization “Reply” (@) to questions or comments
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