

Language and Discourse in Social Media Relational Dynamics: A Communicative Constitution Perspective

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This article presents and discusses a theoretical proposition to study social media and their relational dynamics based on the role of language and discourse in communicative interactions that occur in social media. We propose a theoretical foundation that is grounded on the communicative constitution perspective that focuses on the power of communicative acts and practices to create organizational realities. The theoretical proposition suggests that social media are communicatively constituted, just as are relationships; thus, relational dynamics in social media that feature oral or written communications should be analyzed through the study of actors' language and discourses. The article concludes with reflections on the implications of this theoretical proposition for the study of relational dynamics in social media and provides suggestions for future research.

Keywords: social media, relationship, language, discourse, online conversation

Relational theories proliferate in social sciences; yet, relational theories that take a communication standpoint are poorly connected among scholars of different communication subdisciplines. Public relations has for the past 30 years positioned itself as one of those communication areas in which the study of relations among publics and organizations is the central tenant for understanding the core function of public relations in organizations. There are numerous definitions of *publics*, but typically public relations scholars concur with Dewey's (1927) situational definition of a public as a group of people who, in facing a similar problem, recognize it and organize themselves to address it. Especially during the past decade, much attention has been devoted to relational theories in public

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relations based on concepts such as involvement, engagement, and dialogue (Taylor & Kent, 2014), implying that the most effective manner to establish and cultivate organization–public relationships (OPRs) is based on mutual trust, respect, and commitment (Hon & Grunig, 1999). For many organizations, what are commonly called social media have become the *loci* where such dialogic, involving, and engaging relationships are attempted under the assumption that such dialogue, involvement, and relational engagement could form and be cultivated. Given the central relevance of building relationships with publics and the rising usage of a range of social media by public relations professionals, we offer a critical reflection on the limitations of mainstream conceptualizations of relationship in the public relations scholarly literature, specifically in relation to the social media environment, and propose an alternative theoretical proposition to study social media relational dynamics that takes a communicative approach. This communicative approach is borrowed from organizational communication scholarship and is based on the epistemological potentialities of language and discourse as expressed in the communicative constitution perspective. The theoretical proposition proposed in this article offers an alternative approach to understanding social media relational dynamics and ultimately suggests methodological roots in explaining relationships between publics and organizations in social media that have been used by communication scholars other than public relations scholars in other contexts and situations. By transposing heuristic insights from other communication and network sociology disciplines to the public relations literature, this article contributes to the cross-fertilization of different communication-based traditions that is so much needed for the development of communication disciplines, as Craig (1999) early advised.

This article does not examine all existing literature, but presents key concepts that illustrate the rationale for offering an alternative theoretical view. Thus, the first part of this article discusses the relational nature of social media, in which we argue that the main conceptualizations of relationship in public relations are deficient in explaining relational dynamics in social media. Then we discuss the role of language and discourse in social media in shaping perceptions, opinions, and relational meanings among actors and organizations and present the communicative constitution perspective and its theoretical contributions. The article concludes with reflections on the implications of the study for relational dynamics in social media and provides suggestions for future research.

Relational Dynamics and Social Media

Ledingham and Bruning (2000) assert that public relations' primary function is to help organizations develop mutual and beneficial relationships with key publics through diverse communicative means, which today include social media. During the past two decades, studies on relationship have exponentially increased, and these relational theories have emerged primarily around two lines of thinking: the relationship management theory advocated by Bruning and Ledingham (1999) and Ledingham (2003) and a situational approach advocated by Hon and Grunig (1999) and scholars involved in the Excellence Project.¹

¹ The Excellence Project is the first systematic study that investigated how, why, and to what extent communication and specifically public relations contributes to the achievement of organizational

Public relations scholarship dealing with a relational focus has been interested primarily in developing a concept of OPR and the identification and definition of its dimensions, attributes, antecedents, outcomes, consequences, metrics, and contingency over time (cf. Huang & Zhang, 2015; Ledingham, 2003). Critics point out that most public relations research does not consider OPR as a dynamic process. Rather, OPR is often initiated by organizations as the central focal actors of OPR interactions (Heath, 2013; Ki & Shin, 2006; Valentini, Kruckeberg, & Starck, 2012). The primary scholarly attention that has been given to the concept of relationship is not followed by an equal interest in exploring different theoretical perspectives, especially within today's social media milieu that public relations scholars acknowledge to have potential for the development and cultivation of OPRs (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Valentini, 2015). Many relationship management studies in public relations have built on excellence theory and concepts such as symmetry or on reciprocity and trust, which are borrowed from interpersonal relations, psychology, and other behavioral studies (Ki & Shin, 2015). Such studies investigate how to predict and influence public behaviors as well as examine communicative impacts on public attitudes, forgetting that most relationships come into being and flourish thanks to people who are interacting rather than being the antecedents of people's communicative actions.

Specifically within the study of social media relations, relationships in social media studies, for the most part, are interrogated by transposing concepts and theoretical assumptions that have been developed from interpersonal relations; however, social media relations are fundamentally different (cf. Valentini, 2015). Social media are defined as a group of Internet-based applications that allows for the creation and exchange of user-generated contents (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012). The "focus of social media is on how users interact, that is, attention on users' behaviors" (Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012, p. 6). A wide variety of social media exists, ranging from social sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr to social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Even though each social medium retains some uniqueness, today a general convergence in terms of offering similar online contents (e.g., textual, visual, audio) and affordances is occurring. Given the scope of discussing social media potential for relational outcomes, in this article, questions concerning social media in which explicit communicative utterances in the form of written or oral communications are visible with or without visual communications are specifically addressed. These types of social media offer more explicit information on the quality of relationships between social actors than those focusing on pictures only.

Although social media may seem not to have significantly changed the ways in which OPRs are attempted (Valentini, 2015), they have, in reality, made more evident the major limitations in OPR conceptualization. These limitations exist because of a basic assumption that OPRs consist of dyadic relationships between an organization and its key publics, whereas the social media environment is more likely to be a network-based structure of multiple relationships (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Valentini et al., 2012) or network ecology (Yang & Taylor, 2015). Such limitations are significant because how OPR is conceptualized says much about how organizations communicatively interact with online publics, how they use language to shape specific discourses that lead to certain ideas and create specific meanings for publics, and, consequently, how they communicate relational intentions. Mainstream OPR

objectives. One of the main findings showed that public relations' contribution to organizational activities relies on building mutual and beneficial OPRs (for more information, see Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992).

conceptualization stands on the premise that an organization is the hub of diverse, direct relations with its stakeholders. With such understanding, the sender, that is, the organization, is assumed to be at the center of communicative interactions among stakeholders and thus is able to influence communication flows. However, this assumption cannot be applicable in the context of social media, in which relationships are multiple, asynchronous, and often have an undefined other counterpart (Papacharissi, 2002; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015). Furthermore, relationships are not stable, linear interactions that are necessarily initiated by organizations; rather, they "can be formed and dissolved more quickly, depending on their [publics'] interests and concerns" (Valentini et al., 2012, p. 876). Given that relationships are multiple and multidirectional, Heath (2013) postulates that it would be more appropriate to define them as organizations-stakeholders relationships. This means that "organizations have relationships with one another as well as with all of the constellations of stakeholder/stakeseeker combinations that make up the relevant fabric (network complexity and political economy) of society" (Heath, 2013, p. 427). Sommerfeldt and Kent (2015) argue that "simply counting the number of relationships an organization holds within an environment, however, or evaluating the quality of dyadic relationships is not the same as assessing the overall structural importance of an organization in a network" (p. 247). These scholars suggest studying relationship structures through network theory. On the same line of thought, Yang and Taylor (2015) speak about the study of network ecology and propose a network-based model that is built on similar premises as those exposed by Kruckeberg (2007) and Kruckeberg and Vujnovic (2010). These scholars decenter the role of corporate organizations in society and propose a three-dimensional "organic model" of public relations, in which each organization (public, semipublic, private, and nonprofit) is only a part of the whole social system that public relations practitioners must consider.

Social network analysis has gained relevance among many areas of communication studies; specifically, in public relations, it has recently seen a scholarly revival when dealing with the social media environment, given social network analysis' capacity to provide a better picture of publics' relations with organizations (cf. Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Yang & Taylor, 2015). Although a network perspective can offer a new theoretical venue for the study of OPR, helping identifying those publics and networks that organizations should focus on with their public relations strategies and tactics (Sedereviciute & Valentini, 2011; Yang & Taylor, 2015), it does not offer insights into which communication practices and structures among social actors are embedded in specific relations or an understanding of their function in constructing meaningful OPRs. Albeit relevant from a relational point of view, network theory is not fundamentally a communication theory and, as such, does not help public relations establish itself as an identifiable field of communication study.

An emergent line of relational research in public relations proposes abandoning organizations as the central element in studying relations because relationships with publics are not centered on organizations, and suggests focusing on issue arenas, defined as "places of interaction where an issue is discussed by stakeholders and organizations" (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010, p. 316), and/or rhetorical arenas (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Frandsen & Johansen, 2013), defined as "a multi-vocal, public, semi-public, and private spaces where many 'voices' meet, compete, collaborate and/or negotiate" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013, p. 799). In such arenas, relationships are constructed around either specific issues or voices, and their study is based on a qualitative approach. In these arenas, online relationships more resemble a network of asymmetric relations among discrete subjects who may be more central in the

network at certain points of time, depending on their levels of participation—often measured through their level of active communicative behavior—in the network. A problem with studying social media relations via issue or rhetorical arenas is that it changes the way in which an organization should approach relationship management. Traditionally, public relations professionals on behalf of organizations identify their key publics and classify them according to their levels of awareness and involvement with an organization and/or issue that can be linked to an organization. Given the limited capacities of organizations to develop meaningful relations with all publics, only publics that possess specific organizational resources are considered and then prioritized in organizational relationship management activities because such publics can leverage at any time their capacity to affect the performance of the organizations. Studying social media relations via issue or rhetorical arenas, however, turns upside-down traditional relationship management approaches and deconstructs the premise that relationships are initiated by organizations on the basis of an assessment of the type and level of resources that specific publics hold and of which an organization is in need. In understanding relational dynamics in issue or rhetorical arenas, the study of voices and issues as constructed through communicative interactions plays a key role. Accordingly, online relationships are formed through the speech acts of those voicing their concerns rather than being the specific characteristics of a public. The capacity of affecting an organization—often a common parameter used by organizations and communication scholars to identify publics—is at the “verbal level,” and diverse social movements have already empowered the potential of social media for enhancing their activities (Dahlgren, 2005). Yet, diverse studies show that voices are fragmented and issues are multiple and often inconsistent (Papacharissi, 2002) in social media. This poses a question about the extent to which a public can be considered a relevant social actor for organizational relationship activities because it requires that the concerns and voice of that public are recognized and acknowledged by an organization.

Although we agree with Papacharissi (2002) and Melucci (1996) that the Internet—and we could extend social media—have not enhanced civic participation because many voices remain unheard by organizations, we concur with Dahlgren (2005), who noted that it is “the ‘horizontal communication’ of civic interaction that is paramount” (p. 155) to be studied because it provides the background for citizens’ engagement—and we would suggest organizational engagement. The latter should be considered to a prerequisite for relationship building (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Similar to Melucci’s (1996) suggestion to study social movements through a hermeneutical approach that places identity and meaning at center stage, we advocate the study of relationships as the products of communicative practices among actors in communicative interactions. On the structural level, networks are “configurations of social relationships interwoven with meaning” and “social relationships as the basic building blocks of networks [even in social media] are conceived of as dynamic structures of reciprocal (but not necessarily symmetric) expectations between alter and ego” (Fuhse, 2009, p. 51). Relationships in social media can be defined as dynamic structures of reciprocal expectations constructed through communicative interactions. Communicative interactions are dynamic processes, and their study requires a bottom-up approach such as the social constructivist and hermeneutical approaches underline. Although these approaches may not be “new” for those scholars interested in social movements and political civic engagement and in the formation, the organizing, and even the identity of such groups (e.g., Albrecht, 2006; Melucci, 1996; White, 2008), the application of such approaches in public relations has not systematically been addressed, including a general proposition to study and socially construct what

constitutes a public in public relations through emic approaches (cf. Botan & Soto, 1998; Leitch & Motion, 2010; Leitch & Neilson, 2000; G. M. Vasquez, 1993).

To advance this line of thinking, we propose a specific perspective that benefits from the richness of communication theory, advocating the study of language use in discourses as the central tenant for theorizing relationships, particularly within the social media environment. Hereby, we understand the study of language as the study of language form, language meaning, and language in context. It is the basic unit of analysis for understanding conversations leading to specific discourses. Gee (2014) states that

discourse is the sequence of sentences. It is the ways in which sentences connect and relate to each other across time in speech or writing. As we speak or write we choose what words and phrases we will put into or package into sentences. (p. 18)

Given that social media networks are virtual and exist through online communicative interactions, the act of creating and sharing contents that carry specific language forms, meanings, and in context constitutes a discursive structure that can help better understand how certain communicative patterns of publics' communicative interactions impact the ways in which participants see, relate, and act on organizations and on any event that is perceived to produce critical attention to OPRs. The following section elaborates on the role of language and discourse in shaping the social media environment, together with a specific focus on relational implications.

Language and Discourse in Social Media: Relational Implications

Relationship formation is complex, and most scholars would agree that relationship formation involves the long-term evaluation of expectations toward the other that is based on an assessment of the other's present and expected communicative behaviors. In social media, individuals experience the communicative behaviors of others primarily through communicative interactions that form the basis of online conversations. Conversations are emerging, spontaneous, reciprocal interactions among individuals who perform situated adaptation and adjust their actions to contingent circumstances. These interactions are multiple, interdependent, not linear, and occur simultaneously (Mengis & Eppler, 2008). Online conversations typically take the form of communicative interactions based on an exchange of contents that are interdependent and adapted to the communicative situation as well as to the social medium-specific features. Not all communicative interactions turn into conversations (Papacharissi, 2002); yet, some do, especially those occurring in dedicated online forums and conversational groups. Valentini (2015) observed that "content creation is an important component of social media conversations, and social media conversations generate interactions among publics and between publics and organizations" (p. 5).

Online communicative interactions constitute discursive practices that serve as a mechanism for publics to shape and construct their own opinions by sharing and discussing social media content and even by giving meaning to experiences that they directly or indirectly face. Online communicative interactions can also function as a mechanism to construct collective identities (Dahlgren, 2005), especially if

individuals participating in conversations share similar views. When relationships in social media are viewed as networks of communicative interactions that are unfolded through a combination of textual, visual, and audio contents, it becomes paramount to understand the role of language and discourse in shaping these relationships (White, 2008). Specifically, if relationships in social media are conceptualized as a network of communicative interactions and discourses that are created by people, the study of language and discourse can provide insights into people's intentions in contributing discursively to the constitution and shaping of a specific network and/or online public forum and even relationships. In network research, White (2008) proposes reconceptualizing how actors, action, and social relations are understood through an analysis of identities, relations, and their social formations. The study of language and discourse can inform about the contents and forms that are accepted in defined online arenas on social media. Eventually, this examination can apprise us about relationships among members of publics, these publics' relationships with organizations, and the interorganizational relations that result from continuous communicative interactions that follow patterns, for example, through an analysis of turn-taking and sequencing in conversational analyses. People not only develop their own ideas about others based on what those individuals post (content) but also on how they discuss different matters (form and interaction) (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). Yet, we still lack complete understanding of how these opinions moderate public participation in online initiatives and conversations and how particular social media communicative interactions among individuals become conversations that develop into specific discourses and meanings, which at certain points of time eventually could turn into online relationships.

In public relations scholarship, research on social media communicative interactions has thus far been limited to exploring the levels of awareness, knowledge, and expectations of specific publics about different issues through the use of software tracking, mapping of online contents, and measurement of online sentiment (Inversini, Marchiori, Dedekind, & Cantoni, 2010). In other disciplines, social media communicative interactions have been studied to unveil public opinions and general trends. For instance, several studies in political and health communication focus on the links among social media discourses and public opinion, arguing that social media content could be a valuable predictor of public opinion trends (Hawn, 2009; O'Connor, Krieger, & Ahn, 2010). Scholars have borrowed insights from earlier studies on print news and TV media to investigate how social media may influence public perception. Dependency theory has been used to explain social media effects on public perception; for example, early mass media studies have suggested that the ways in which news media discourses affect public opinion depend on an individual's level of involvement with an issue, prior knowledge on related issues, and meanings generated by media framing, as well as on the extent to which these are connected to people's living experiences (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976).

Nevertheless, print and TV media are much different from social media, both in their technological features and in their offered affordances. Investigations are required on which specific mechanisms explain how certain social media communicative interactions and discourses can influence public opinion and how these mechanisms may impact relational outcomes. Social media discourses represent a set of frames that are all enacted at the same time by official online news media, organizations, and people. They appear as an inextricable set of opinions by engaged people who are not only consuming these discourses but who are also creating and shaping them. Thus, the online environment has added more complexity to public opinion formation in general and specifically to online

relationship formation. Several questions remain unanswered and require further research. For example, how are discourses shaped on social media? Who shapes them? How do discourses affect public perceptions through social media? What discursive factors affect public perceptions that may generate relational expectations? How do relational dynamics take place on social media? To contribute to this discussion, we suggest a bottom-up approach as a foundation for future research in social media, that is, focusing on the role of communication in constructing network structure (cf. Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) through a communicative constitution perspective.

Social Media Relational Dynamics in a Communicative Constitution Perspective

On the premises that social media relations are virtual, dynamic, complex, multidimensional, and multidirectional and that communication plays a central role in the definition, specification, and development of social media relations, we propose a theoretical proposition for a communicative definition of social media that feature oral or written communications that is based on the epistemological potentialities of language and discourse as expressed in the communicative constitution perspective. The communication constitution perspective seems fruitful in analyzing how social media conversations function and produce interactions among publics and these publics' interactions with organizations. This perspective also offers a theoretical foundation to examine the process of creating shared organization-public expectations by constructing and co-constructing meanings and shared understanding of online content. This perspective is fundamentally different from the OPR perspective because it suggests studying relational dynamics through the study of language use, meaning, and context in social media rather than by measuring relationships through quantitative measures of likes, views, and so forth. This perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the impact of linguistic choices and discourses in publics' opinion formation and relational meanings that define the quality of relationships (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999). In the following sections, we elaborate on the basic concepts that provide a justification for the communicative constitution perspective and then apply its concepts to the social media context to discuss their implications for studying social media from a relational approach.

The Communicative Constitution Perspective: Basic Concepts

The role of language and discourse as the means through which people create shared meanings and opinions and use frames to shape others' opinions and meanings is well known among communication scholars who view communication as a constitutive element of social reality in line with social constructivism epistemological traditions (e.g., Craig, 1999; Johnson, 1981; Mumby & Stohl, 1996; Weick, 1979). In this view, communication cannot be represented by simply a transmission model in which a sender sends a message to a receiver via a channel; rather, communication is a process of symbolic interactions in which different individuals play sender and receiver roles interchangeably. These interactions enact social structures that define social reality. Given that communication performs social structures and that these are not necessarily symmetrical, Deetz and Mumby (1990) postulate that communicative practices inherently present diverse power configurations among social actors. This premise obviously is not new. Scholars familiar with the work on language and symbolic power by Bourdieu (1991) acknowledge that a communication practice is a discursive force that produces symbolically powerful language (Edwards, 2006) and that communication is fundamentally a medium of

power through which individuals pursue their own interests and display their practical competence. Moreover, communicative interactions not only have the purpose of conveying information but also become essential elements that construct the social reality under discussion. According to Cooren and Sandler (2014), a communicative constitution

means that many different things can be identified (by the participants and the analyst) as literally and figuratively expressing themselves in any given form of communication (a text, an utterance, a dialogue, an icon, a gesture, etc.), and can thus be acknowledged as constituting a given situation. (p. 226)

A communicative constitution perspective among different scholars in communication has gained more resonance in the past 20 years to explain the role of communication in organizations (cf. Schoeneborn et al., 2014), given that scholars who are interested in studying organizations have focused most on examining "how individuals construct organizational structures, processes, and practices and how these, in turn, shape social relations and create institutions that ultimately influence people" (Clegg & Bailey, 2008, p. xiii). This perspective, which is called the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO), is based on the premise that "discursive practices that are employed every day by members of organizations aid in the constitution of meanings in their organizational lives" (McPhee & Zaug, 2009, p. 26) and shape and constitute organizations. Three main CCO schools of thoughts have been identified: the Montreal School of Organizational Communication, the Four-Flows Model (based on Giddens' structuration theory), and Luhmann's theory of social systems (cf. Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Although these schools propose different understandings of CCO, a common ground is their interest in investigating how conversations and texts authored by organizational members constitute organizations. Recent research has expanded to inquire about the role of non-organizational entities in contributing to the constitution of organizations (cf. Schoeneborn & Scherer, 2012). The communicative constitution perspective seems to have become popular among organizational communication scholars because it provides a different framework to study organizations.

Yet, the theoretical underpinning encapsulated by the concept of a communicative constitution is applicable in a range of other fields, and we argue that it has particular value for public relations and social media. Public relations scholarship suggests that the focus of public relations practice should be on the role of communicative actions that influence the development and sharing of common meanings, individual perceptions, and social norms at the micro, meso, and macro levels of social reality. Given that organizations gain a license to operate only if their key publics perceive a reason for organizational existence (Cornelissen, 2011), implicitly, this understanding attributes to communication a fundamental role for organizational and societal functioning and survival. It is through communication that organizations and publics become aware of mutual concerns and eventually develop and share some common meanings. It can be argued thus that public relations scholars could exploit constitutive approaches to better value the strategic role of communication in creating organization-public relational realities. In the next section, we elaborate on why and how the communicative constitution perspective provides a useful theoretical standpoint to study social media.

The Communicative Constitution Perspective: Insights for Social Media

The main assumption of the communicative constitution perspective is that a reality for an organization or other entity is socially constructed through language and discourse. In other words, the words and language that people use and the way in which people discuss something are ways to construct the identity of that thing. As we discussed, social media are conceptualized as a network of communicative interactions and discourses that are created by people, and, thus, social media are defined by the communicative practices—in several social media, this happens through specific linguistic choices that underline specific discourses in written and oral communications—of the people using them. Similarly, relationships in social media are constituted and negotiated through the presence of diverse communicative interactions that configure spaces and times through collectively negotiated narratives (cf. Vásquez & Cooren, 2013). These can be considered illustrations of communication dynamics that are described in the communicative constitution perspective. This perspective has not yet been systematically applied or discussed in social media inquiry in public relations and organizational studies. Albu and Etter (2016) are among those few scholars who have applied a CCO perspective to the realm of social media, investigating how two organizations used Twitter to interact with their constituents who included both organizational members and nonmembers. They concluded that the hypertextuality of Twitter—and we would extend this to other social media—is fundamental for allowing various actors to co-constitute an organization across multiple spaces and times (p. 22). They also asserted that Twitter changes the dynamics of communicatively constituting organizations, given that Twitter texts are constantly assembled, reshaped, and dismantled by a variety of authors who are beyond organizational control. Albu and Etter, however, considered social media simply as devices of social materiality in which social media are seen as “active mediators, ‘fixers’ and stabilizers of social, cultural and political networks” (Pels, Hetherington, & Vandenberghe, 2002, p. 8) that help other organizations define themselves. Online communicative interactions in social media do not simply function as performative phenomena (Pels et al., 2002); they also function as constitutive elements of social media environments. Online communicative interactions among diverse social actors define and constitute the “identity” of specific social media that are intended as spaces (Dahlgren, 2005) having their own structures, processes, social norms, and rules of engagement and interaction. In sociological terms, without communicative interactions among individuals, social media will lose their function of being “social” and become simply online, digital platforms collecting diverse contents (cf. Romenti, Murtarelli, & Valentini, 2014; Valentini & Kruckeberg, 2012). According to this understanding, social media are the effects of online communications and not their predecessors. From a communicative constitution perspective, social media can thus be considered communicatively constituted environments in which specific communicatively constituted arenas centered on issues or voices can emerge, and not organizations in their own right as they do not possess per se all structures to be defined as such.

This, however, does not preclude that over time, social media can (but do not necessarily have to) develop certain features such as own identity, thirdness, and actorhood that can be considered “organizational.” When they acquire such features, they emerge as arenas (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013) or fluid social collectives that achieve organizationality through communication (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Based on this idea of communicative constitution, we present this proposition:

Social media are not simple transmission channels because they can actively participate in the process through which meanings are produced (cf. Leonardi & Barley, 2011). Despite the fact that they are shaped by similar processes of communicative constitutions of organizations, they cannot be considered organizations on their own because of their lack of social media actorhood and thirdness as people's communicative interactions constitute social media. But, social media can be conceived as communicatively constituted environments, in which arenas possessing organizational features can emerge.

Social media are communicatively constituted environments given that social media users consume, use, create, co-create, and share forms of communicative expressions that are shaped in textual, audio, and visual contents. These constitute the form, quality, and type of social interactions and, thus, the relationships that occur in social media (cf. Cooren & Sandler, 2014). According to Leonardi and Barley (2011), technologies have communicative properties that, as such, affect the organizing of communication among people. They are not simply "transmission" instruments, but become communicative devices in their own right once their technological features become material. Yet, this is not sufficient to consider them as a form of organization.

Furthermore, many communicative processes occurring in social media arenas reflect the four major processes behind the concept of a "communicative constitution of organization," that is, self-structuring, membership negotiation, activity coordination, and institutional positioning (cf. McPhee & Zaig, 2009). We argue that these processes can explain how issue and rhetorical arenas, including those that are based on social media, form and develop, and they allow us to conceptualize social media as discursive virtual places of communicative interactions that carry symbolic meanings. First, we see the self-structuring process as one that defines how communicative interactions occur on a specific social media platform. Although the type of technological features offered by social media vary, as does the level of affordances that they can offer to users, social norms exist of how interactions take place that are communicatively constituted (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Second, membership "negotiation" in online issue and rhetorical arenas, that is, the act of being considered a legitimate contributor of opinions in online issue and rhetorical arenas, as opposed to be considered a troll, is also communicatively constituted, given that the relevance of the content that is posted and shared can determine whether a new member is considered legitimate or not in that specific arena (Kozinets et al., 2010). Yet, unless social media are used by brand communities or specific online tribes, issue as well as rhetorical arenas adjust continuously, depending on the issue at stake (Luoma-aho & Vos, 2010) or on the voices (Frandsen & Johansen, 2013) that are present at a point of time. This process is similar to that described by McPhee and Zaig (2009) with their concept of activity coordination. Finally, communication plays a key role in the process of institutional positioning of an arena in social media. Given that social media are conversational platforms that exist because of communicative interactions among users who are directly or indirectly connected to one another as a network of relationships, social media are the environment and technological enablers of online arenas' formation and development. The process of institutional position occurs during this process of arena formation and development once these arenas form and negotiate their "online identity" through symbolic interactions of their users. To detect an arena "identity," that is, those features, social norms, narratives, and voices that make a particular arena

different from others, an important element is the determination of the size and boundary of a specific online arena and an understanding of that arena's public activities and relations.

As was discussed earlier, social media environments fundamentally exist and proliferate because of people's communicative interactions. Online communicative interactions are best described as networks of non-dyadic, multiple, and multidirectional relationships, known as *ties*, that are formed by communicative *symbolic* interactions—such as “likes,” “shares,” “retweets,” and “hashtags”—as well as *material* in the form of creation of actual content and online conversations. Thus, an arena in social media becomes “institutionalized,” that is, it becomes acknowledged by other social actors and institutions, when certain patterns of conversations (symbolic or material) occur. Some social media pages will become institutionalized as online arenas in which consumers meet to talk about consumer products, and others will become institutionalized as arenas of political discussions. Some of these social media pages will be established by organizations, and others will form through the communicative contributions of individuals who share an interest and want to express their voices online. That is to say, arenas are not stable, they can occur simultaneously across different social media platforms, and agreement and consensus are not necessary. Furthermore, social media as communicatively constituted environments should not be confused with communicatively constituted arenas emerging in social media: The former do not possess organizationality, the latter can show certain features of it. In light of these reflections, we argue that the CCO perspective is a germane and valuable theoretical lens to support the conceptualization of a communicative constitution of social media that explains, from a communication perspective, the dynamics of interactions among publics, organizations, and technology actors in constituting and shaping the social media environment and social media arenas.

Implications for a Relational Approach

Despite considering relationship management as an important function of public relations, Heath (2013) warned that relationships are more complex than those that are described in the public relations literature, and thus relationships should not be viewed as isolated phenomena whose parts and components can be studied and measured as isolated items. Other public relations scholars (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Valentini et al., 2012) support this contention, calling for new venues of theoretical understandings of what constitutes a relationship and how relations are formed and evolve. Our proposition of communicatively constituted social media provides a theoretical answer to this question by postulating that relationships in social media are first and foremost communicatively constituted because communication impacts opinions, attitudes, behaviors, and even expectations on relational formation and outcomes. Hence, communication constitutes the network of interactions, or the building block, of a social media environment. This implies that studying social media relations requires a different methodological and epistemological stance on what should be the unit of analysis and how this should be researched, rather than current mainstream public relations relational research that too often focuses on surveying behavioral effects of online communications.

The proposed communicative constitution perspective emphasizes the role of language and discourse in social media interactions. We recommend conversation analysis as a qualitative research method to study social interactions that embraces oral and written communications. For instance, social

media relations could be studied by analyzing conversations from the point of view of their packaging form, that is, the way in which actors formulate a sentence to unveil the scope of the communicative act based on the social medium messaging features; the organization of turn-taking, that is, the process by which actors in a conversation decide who is to speak next; the sequence organization, that is, how actions are ordered in conversation; and role, identity, and relations management, that is, how communicative actions influence the identity construction of social actors, their role in the conversation, and their approach in managing the relations (e.g., Beech, MacIntosh, & MacLean, 2010; Mengis & Eppler, 2008). Other interdisciplinary approaches that deal with discourse, language, conversations, and semiotics, for instance, multimodality for a combination of text-, audio-, and image-based communications, could also provide the methodological tools for the examination of relational processes from a communicative point of view.

Another crucial implication of our theoretical proposition concerns the evolution of methods for the measurement of relationships' performance and their effectiveness. Today, relationship measurement is based on analytical components of ties among actors (e.g., the levels of trust and of commitment), borrowed mainly from behavioral literature. From a performance measurement perspective, some key indicators also measure quality, time, and costs. Certainly, such variables will still be valid for the evaluation of state-of-the-art of relationships, but they will not be able to deal with levels of complexity and dynamism of digital networks and the constitutive power of language, discourses, and conversations in social media relations. According to the constitutive communication perspective, the effectiveness of each network's node probably can be measured according to its contribution to the network/community in creating synergies, new symbolic meanings, and collective opinions. Indeed, there is a need for research that takes a communicative constitution-based approach to the study of digital relationships, recognizing the complex and interrelated nature of social media relations.

Given the great role of language and discourse in the building of online communicative interactions that promote shared meanings in conversations with online publics, the application of a communicative constitution paradigm in studying social media relations can offer to public relations a theoretical framework for understanding and evaluating an organization's communicative efforts to contribute to the shaping and developing of organizational meanings among publics and at the same time to understand publics' opinions and perceptions based on their communicative interactions.

Conclusions and Future Research

This article proposes that social media are communicatively constituted environments as much as they are social media relations. We postulate that social media are communicatively constituted environments in which communicatively constituted arenas can emerge and are not simply transmission channels. As environments, they are fluid social collectives that resemble organizations, but they do not possess all structural elements to be considered as such (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Communicative interactions shape social media environments and may over time turn them into specific social media arenas. They can also actively contribute in the process by which relational meaning is produced. Therefore, to understand social media environments, we must first examine how communicative interactions take place among publics and organizations across networks and communities. Studying these

communicative interactions requires a focus on language and discourse and the different communicative practices that provide signifiers of communicative structures, processes, and understanding of others in a communicative context. Such focus, we argue, would allow for a better understanding of how relationships are constructed in social media and how meanings about events, social actors, and organizations are negotiated and shaped through communication. Relationships in social media are defined by communicative interactions more often than by direct, lived experiences. Therefore, when studying social media relations to explore how communications among publics, between publics and organizations, and among organizations occur, it is important to understand how different social actors and technological features shape discourses and what such discourses say about the ways in which publics and organizations structure their relationships and understand situations.

In this article, we have offered a theoretical proposition that borrows basic concepts from the communicative constitution perspective, an organizational communication theory that argues that discursive practices employed by members of organizations constitute meanings in organizational lives and shape organizations. This perspective will allow capturing the powerfulness of communication processes that constitute relational dynamics in social media. The implications of this perspective for public relations scholarship and practice are profound, particularly in juxtaposition to the predominant behavioral point of view of relationship management scholarship. A focus on the power of communicative acts and practices as socially constructed through language and discourse to study relational dynamics in social media is essential because these relationships are multiple, asynchronous, and often have an undefined counterpart. This is a reality that public relations scholars and practitioners must ponder, contemplate, and further explore.

This article is conceptual. Our intent is to advocate a different theoretical foundation to study social media and their relational dynamics in public relations. Future research should not only seek to validate this explanatory stance through empirical investigation but also to consider other forms of use of the communicative constitution perspective to explain other phenomena that are more greatly shaped by communication processes than by social media relations. Future research should include an investigation of organizational identity and reputation management by examining how publics as well as organizational members communicatively construct the identity and reputation of an organization. Further investigations could also examine, for example, how diverse communicatively constituted interactions affect crisis and risk communication, health communication, lobbying, and public diplomacy. Through the lens of the communicative constitution perspective, such examinations can unfold the message construction process that may emerge from conversations and how these shape and affect the diffused contents and the symbolic meanings that this process carries. We believe that the communicative constitution perspective can offer deeper and more complex insights into how people form and create opinions that shape their expectations and behaviors toward different matters that are of paramount importance for the public relations profession as well as for other communication industries and specializations.

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