EXPLORING NEGATIVE PEER COMMUNICATION OF COMPANIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON ORGANIZATION-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

By

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To my Mom
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EXPLORING NEGATIVE PEER COMMUNICATION OF COMPANIES ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON ORGANIZATION-PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

By

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Social media greatly affects how people communicate with their social contacts in their personal life and for business needs. Publics use social media to develop their personal social network, which can influence their attitudes and behaviors. In addition, companies would like to build their public image and maintain positive relationships with audiences through social media. In this background, peer communication is an important socialization activity for both publics and companies. Peer communication on social media can either be positive or negative. The heavy weight of negative information can lead to a negativity bias, where people’s behaviors and attitudes are strongly affected by negative information. Therefore, negative peer communication may significantly influence the minds of publics and their relationships with companies.

The present study discusses the antecedents that influence NPC about companies on social media and its impact on organization-publics relationships. The findings of this study will provide theoretical implications on peer communication, companies’ social media strategies, and relationship management between publics and companies. In addition, public relations practitioners can obtain implications on how to establish positive relationships with publics by avoiding potential factors that can bring about negative peer communication on social media.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as Internet-based websites that facilitate the creation and exchange of consumer-generated content. Social media can be viewed as the generalization of various information-sharing platforms, such as social networking sites (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn), creative work sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, and Flickr), microblogging sites (e.g., Twitter and Tumblr), and collaborative sites (e.g., Wikipedia) (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Among the diverse types of social media, social networking sites (SNSs) received significant attention from scholars. As an important communication platform, SNSs affect how individuals communicate in their personal life and for business needs (Okazaki, 2009). The popularity of social media urges public relations professionals to pay attention to how social media can be used to manage relationships with strategic publics (Men & Muralidharan, 2017).

From the perspective of publics, they use social media to establish social networks, which facilitates the exchange of opinions among peers. Publics usually share personal experiences and exchange information with their SNS contacts (Chu & Choi, 2011). People are more likely to search for information about products or companies on social media than on company websites (Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012). The process of communication on social media changes the communication behavior and decision-making process of publics (Muratore, 2008). For example, peer-to-peer communication on SNSs allows publics to obtain reviews and recommendations about products, which may affect their purchase decisions (Chu & Choi, 2011). From the perspective of companies, peer communication on social media influences how companies build their public image and maintain positive relationships with publics, because peers are important socialization agents who can affect publics’ behaviors and attitudes toward companies.
Information related to a company can be easily distributed on social media; hence, peer communication on social media changed the method of how publics receives company-related content (Men & Tsai, 2014). Also, social media is important platform for displaying the attitude of publics toward brands, products, or companies, which may engender peer communication that may affect organization–public relationships (OPRs).

Peer communication on social media can either be positive or negative (Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998; Skowronski & Carlston, 1998), and differentiating the effects of positive and negative peer communication is crucial (Bambauer–Sachse & Mangold, 2011). Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed that negative information is four times as convincing as positive information. Meanwhile, other studies show that people tend to focus on negative information more than on positive ones (East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008; Herr, Kardes, & Kim, 1991; Lau & Ng, 2001). Such heavy weight of negative information can lead to a *negativity bias*, where people’s attitudinal and behavioral expressions are more strongly affected by negative information than by positive information (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). In other words, people’s negative motivational system is more responsive than their positive motivational system when they receive the same amounts of stimuli (Ito et al., 1989). Therefore, this paper proposed that negative peer communication (NPC) may significantly influence the minds of publics and their relationships with companies.

Given that social media is important conversational platform for companies, numerous studies have been conducted on alleged benefits of social media use in public relations and positive outcomes of peer communication (Valentini, 2015). However, only a few discussions were conducted about the effect of negative peer communication on social media. To fill this research gap, the present study discusses the antecedents that influence NPC about companies on
social media and its impact on the relationships of publics with these companies. This study used the socialization theory as the theoretical foundation to examine two types of factors: individual factors (i.e., tie strength, social media dependency) and corporate factors (i.e., perceived reputation of companies, public interactions with companies) and how they influence NPC on social media and the final effects on OPRs. The findings of this study will provide theoretical implications on peer communication on social media, social media usage of companies, and relationship management between publics and companies. In addition, public relations practitioners can obtain implications on how to develop operational strategies on social media and establish positive relationships with publics by avoiding potential factors that can bring about negative peer communication on social media.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Research on Social Media in Public Relations

In the past decades, the development of technology has greatly affected public relations (Taylor & Kent, 2010). Discussions about the use of new technology in public relations emerged in the 1990s. Johnson (1997) started a survey on how practitioners utilized new technological communication tools. Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed the two-way communication nature of the World Wide Web. Volumes of research have been conducted recently on the use of social media in public relations activities (Taylor & Kent, 2010). Wright and Hinson (2008) argued the significant influence of web blogs in public relations; they encouraged professionals to use blogs for conveying messages and building relationships with publics. Given the use of new technological platforms, such as blogs, podcasts, and information sharing sites, social media has gradually become an increasingly important tool in public relations (Heller & Parasnis, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Wang et al., 2012).

Social media is a convenient, affordable, interactive channel that allow public relations practitioners to deliver organization-related messages, communicate with objectives, and cultivate relationships with targets without gatekeepers (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Shin, Pang & Kim, 2015; Valentini, 2015). Official websites of companies were first used by public relations practitioners to build communication and cultivate relationships with stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Most companies used websites as a one-way communication tool to publicize products or services (Waters & Lemanski, 2011). Over time, social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, became important communication platforms for companies. Companies became active on their official Facebook pages, which allowed them to deliver feature stories about brands, interact with users, and cultivate positive relationships with publics (Chu & Choi, 2011; Men &
Twitter, a short text-based microblogging platform, is mainly used by companies to share information and directly communicate with followers (Shin et al., 2015).

Valentini (2015) proposed the following three major purposes of companies in using social media: delivering company-controlled information to targeted customers and stakeholders (Valentini, 2015), providing entertainment and benefits to attract public attention (Kent, 2013), and showing valuable public perceptions of companies (Valentini, 2015). Many scholars hold positive attitudes about the benefits that social media brings to public relations (Taylor & Kent, 2010). First, public relations practitioners can directly communicate with stakeholders and targeted customers on social media, rather than solely depending on publications from traditional media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Second, with instant and direct communication on social media, external relationships can be established (Valentini, 2015). Third, company-related information becomes easily accessible, which may improve publics’ awareness of the company (Men & Tsai, 2013; Yang & Kent, 2014). Social media enables companies to communicate interactively and develop positive relationships with publics (Kelleher, 2009). Moreover, social media, as a kind of representative of companies, are used by companies to disseminate tailored information and search for public-related information and data, which includes the content of what publics searches, discusses, purchases, and comments on (Wright & Hinson, 2014; Valentini, 2015).

However, some scholars hold critical attitudes toward the positive effects of social media use by companies (McCorkindale, 2010; Shin et al., 2015). This body of research asserted that discussions about social media use in public relations focused on shallow effects, such as the number of “likes” and “shares,” instead of further effects on the behavior and attitude of publics (McCorkindale, 2010). Companies tend to use single, specific social media platforms for a one-
way message dissemination instead of two-way interactions with publics (Shin et al., 2015). Although many scholars suggested some merits and advantages of using social media for relationship building from the perspective of companies (e.g., Wright & Hinson, 2014; Wu, Hu & Wu, 2010; Valentini, 2015), limited empirical studies discussed how publics’ behavior on social media influence relationship management (Valentini, 2015). The role of social media use in public relations should be examined further.

**Social Media Engagement**

Social media engagement has been regarded as an important element in studying publics’ attitudes and behaviors about mediated messages (Calder, Malthouse, & Schaedel, 2009). Although some scholars disagree on how to precisely define social media engagement (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić & Ilić, 2011; Calder et al., 2009), they agree that the levels of engagement are continuous from low to high. Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, and Zhang (2013) provided two levels to differentiate engagement: 1) *lower engagement*, which means publics passively views content or becomes involved in very basic ways, such as “liking” on Facebook; 2) *higher engagement*, which means publics actively participate in online conversations and creation work. Muntinga, Moorman and Smit (2011) proposed three hierarchical levels of publics’ engagement with companies’ social media platforms: 1) *content consumption* (simply viewing contents without participation); 2) *content contribution* (participating in conversations); 3) *content creation* (creating their own content, which is known as user-generated content). The first level could be considered *reactive* consumption, whereas the second and third levels could be regarded as *proactive* contribution (Tsai & Men, 2013).

The concept of engagement and the consequences of engagement should be differentiated (Calder et al., 2009; Malthouse et al., 2013). The consequences of engagement refer to people’s behavioral or emotional reactions to an engagement. For example, a consumer who purchases a
product after reading online reviews should be considered the consequence of an engagement. The real meaning of engagement focuses on individual experience on social media (Calder et al., 2009). Publics’ experiences with a company constitute his or her engagement with the company. Online experiences tend to be interactive, mutual, and proactive, and the nature of social media is connection and communication; therefore, social media can result in social engagement (Rappaport, 2007).

However, gaps remain in the understanding of publics’ engagement with social media pages of a company. Publics are likely to interact with businesses when such interaction can bring benefits or value to them, such as coupons. However, publics’ yearning for benefits or tangible gain differs from the wish of companies to build intangible connectedness and intimacy with publics (Heller & Parasnis, 2011). The survey conducted by Heller and Parasnis (2011) further showed that although people from around the world with different backgrounds use social media, only about 5% (engaged Authors) regularly interact with company-related posts. About 75% of participants (casual participants) occasionally reply or post company-related posts. Over 20% of participants (silent observers) do not even think about engaging with companies on social media. Although these social media users have accounts and may browse posts quietly on the side, they rarely join discussions or post content on companies’ social media pages. For them, “social media and social networking sites are for personal connections with friends and family, not brands” (Heller & Parasnis, 2011, p.31), thus indicating that publics are more willing to communicate with friends than directly interact with companies on social media (e.g., browse companies’ social media pages, read their posts, and comment under posts).

Peers on social media are more credible and referable sources of information (Bradley, 2010; Chu & Choi, 2011). If peers convey negative attitudes toward a company, publics can be
affected by peers’ attitudes and develop unfavorable perceptions of the company (Malthouse et al., 2013). Alternatively, if peers provide positive reviews about a company, publics may be influenced to create favorable impressions of the company and are motivated to maintain the relationships with the company. Therefore, peer communication can be viewed as an important component of social media engagement (Calder et al., 2009) and can influence publics’ attitudes toward companies (East et al., 2008; Men & Muralidharan, 2017). Public relation practitioners should pay attention when analyzing publics-generated content on social media and regard peer communication on social media as an important component of social media engagement (Chu & Kim, 2011, Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

**Peer Communication**

Peer communication was first defined as obvious peer interactions among publics (Churchill & Moschis, 1979). Publics refers to the group of people who share similar interests in a topic and can be naturally accumulated (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1966), whereas peers refer to people who have similar backgrounds on age, education, or social hierarchy (Pedersen, Razmerita & Colleoni, 2014).

The subtle differences between peer communication and word-of-mouth (WOM) should be recognized. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1966) defined WOM as the process of exchanging information and reviews about products, services, or companies among customers, which may greatly affect customer attitude toward products and their decision-making processes. WOM denotes consumer-dominated communication and is independent of the control of companies (Bass, 1969). Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) received mounting attention with the development of the Internet and extensive use of social media (Pedersen et al., 2014). EWOM refers to the comments about products that are made by potential or actual consumers and are easily accessible to publics through the Internet (Hennig-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh & Gremler,
The objects of eWOM mainly focus on product reviews, and information is exchanged among strangers online in most cases.

Peer communication is a highly specific concept that emphasizes the engagement of publics with their peers, such as friends or acquaintances. In WOM communication, individuals are likely to be passive recipients of information, whereas in peer communication, individuals are proactively engaged in interactive discussions. Men and Muralidharan (2017) argued that peer communication on social media goes beyond the realm of eWOM, which focuses on the interactions or exchange of personal opinions among digital publics. Peers are important socialization agents who can greatly influence publics’ attitude and behavior (Churchill & Moschis, 1979; Men & Muralidharan, 2017; Wang et al., 2012). Previous studies have even proposed that the information and suggestions from peers can greatly affect the decision-making process of publics, especially when making purchase decisions (e.g., Singh, 1990).

Peers on social media can be viewed as a type of trustworthy and referable resource for publics to obtain information (Murray, 1991). People are likely to believe in the information they get from peers on social media, rather than from the official platforms of companies (Pedersen et al., 2014). Also, people are likely to share their personal experiences with peers on social media, which may influence their peers’ behaviors and opinions (Chu & Choi, 2011; Pedersen et al., 2014). High engagement with a company on social media may not definitively bring about public spending on the products or services, but friends’ or family members’ suggestions would make a difference (Heller & Parasnis, 2011). In this sense, public relations practitioners should analyze the effects of peer communication.

**Negative Peer Communication**

Negative communication often carries more diagnostic information and can result in stronger influence in people’s motivational system than positive communication within the
process of impression-formation. This can be described as the negativity bias, and it is an automatic underlying feature of the negative motivational system (Ito et al., 1989). As a result of the negativity bias, publics’ attitudinal and behavioral responses should be more greatly affected by negative activation than positive activation (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). This negativity bias was widely applied in prior research about the effect of negative word-of-mouth. Publics pay much more attention when viewing negative reviews than to positive reviews about products or companies during their decision-making process (Herr et al., 1991; Sen, S., & Lerman, D, 2007). This “negativity bias” is the result of the social environment (Fiske, 1980) because dissatisfied people are more likely to express their negative experiences than satisfied people who may share their positive experiences (Bambauer-Sachse, & Mangold, 2011). Negative information is more persuasive than positive information (Skowronski & Carlston, 1989), and negative WOM has twice as much influence on individuals’ purchase intentions as positive WOM (Arndt, 1967). In addition, affective intelligence theory proposed that publics may result in anger when they receive negative information that violates with their previous positive evaluations, demonstrating that negative information can activate publics’ emotional responses (Redlawsk, Civettini & Lau, 2007). In this case, negative information is diagnostic and may have strong power to affect the attitude and behavior of publics (Engel, Kegerreis, & Blackwell, 1969; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1966).

Based on previous literature, the current study defines negative peer communication as a kind of interpersonal communication through which people proactively engage in negative discussion with peers regarding companies, brands, products, or other subjects (Weinberger, Allen & Dillon, 1981). This study speculates that negative peer communication negatively influences the behaviors and attitudes of publics. Given that people have multiple accesses to
receive organization-related information and share their experiences or express their opinions with peers on social media, companies encounter difficulty in controlling the message publics receives, as well as the attitude of publics when conveying messages (Malthouse et al., 2013). People can be greatly affected by the negative messages about companies from peers, which might be detrimental to the relationships between publics and companies (Calder et al., 2009).

To better understand how (negative) peer communication on social media may influence the attitude of publics about the companies, the following sections will discuss the role peers play in the process of socialization.

**Socialization Theory and Social Learning Process**

Socialization theory argues that people develop their attitudes, values, skills, and behaviors by interacting with others (Churchill & Moschis, 1979). Socialization is defined as the phenomenon in which people learn behavior or attitude to become involved in a group (Morrison, 1995). Two processes explained the socialization theory: the cognitive influence process and the social learning process (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). The cognitive influence process means the attitude or behavior of individuals are formed along with their growth, which is a qualitative development stage (Kim, Lee, & Tomiuk, 2009). Social learning focuses on external interactions between individuals and social networks (Köhler, Rohm, Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2011). For social learning process, peers are important factors in transmitting information, attitudes, opinions, and social norms to recipients. According to the socialization theory, peers serve as socialization agents in the ongoing social learning process and provide surrounding peers with models, rewards, or punishments, leading publics to adopt or avoid behaviors to be socialized in the community (Wang et al., 2012).

Given the theory of social learning and socialization, people may imitate the behaviors of peers through interactions on social media to follow community norms (Wang et al., 2012).
Socialization firstly occurred among people who know each other in real life. But now, socialization can happen among contacts in online networks against the backdrop of social media (Muratore, 2008; Okazaki, 2009). With the features of close-relationship, self-disclosure, conversation, and engagement (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Men & Muralidharan, 2017), peer communication on social media becomes a new process of socialization that allows people to exchange opinions, information, and attitudes with their peers without geographic and time constraints (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010; Pedersen et al., 2014; Ward, 1974).

Festinger (1954) proposed that individuals do not want to interact or communicate with others who are too different from themselves because homophily is an important element for establishing credibility, which affects the social learning process on social media (Wang et al., 2012). Social media provides various online platforms for publics to easily create, share, and discuss information with others, which makes the process of socialization convenient (Muratore, 2008).

The social learning process on social media has three forms: modeling, reinforcement, and social interaction (Lueg & Finney, 2007; Köhler et al., 2011), which describes how individuals are socialized to develop their behaviors and attitudes. The modeling process means that publics may imitate the behaviors of socialization agents who are meaningful or influential to the learners (Mischel, 1973; Moschis & Churchill, 1978). For example, individuals may follow the behavior of their peers to imitate them and gain community identification (Lueg & Finney, 2007). In the reinforcement process, publics may develop or discard behaviors or values because of a reward (e.g., closer relationships with peers) or punishment (e.g., alienation from peers) from socialization agents (Lueg & Finney, 2007; Wang et al., 2012). The social interaction process can be viewed as a combination of modeling and reinforcement (Moschis &
Churchill, 1978), which means that socialization agents and the social contexts will influence the process of social interaction.

Peers, such as friends and colleagues, serve as important socialization agents (Lueg & Finney, 2007), even more so than family members (Churchill & Moschis, 1979). Based on socialization theory and previous discussions, the present study intends to propose a model that incorporates antecedents of negative peer communication as a special form of social media engagement and negative peer communication’s outcome as related to OPRs.

Antecedents of Negative Peer Communication

Drawing from previous literature, this study examined two types of antecedent factors of negative peer communication: individual factors and corporate factors. Given that social media is an important source for publics to receive information related to companies (Calder et al., 2009), and peers serve as significant socialization agents that can influence publics’ perceptions of companies (Wang et al., 2012), this study examines individual antecedent factors which include social media dependency and tie strength (Chu & Choi, 2011; Men & Muralidharan, 2017; Wang et al., 2012). In addition, this study focused on publics’ negative peer communication about companies, thus factors related to companies should also be considered as possible antecedents. Previous literature proposed that the more publics perceive a company’s reputation to be favorable, the more likely they engage in positive discussion about the company (Hong & Yang, 2011). Publics tend to communicate more about a company with their peers when they have more social media interactions with the company (Men & Muralidharan, 2017). Therefore, this study examines corporate antecedent factors of negative peer communication, which include perceived reputation of the company and interactions with the company on social media (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant & Unnava, 2000; Herr et al., 1991; Lau & Ng, 2001).
Social media dependency. Media system dependency theory indicated that publics are more likely to be affected by messages from media when they depend more on media to attain their goals (e.g., sociability, entertainment, and information) (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976; Lien & Cao, 2014). Media dependency can be viewed as the relationship between individuals and media, which demonstrates how publics’ goals could be completed by depending on the resources media provided (Sun, Rubin, & Haridakis, 2008). The more publics depend on social media, the more likely they can be influenced by social media. According to the findings from previous literature, media dependency not only influences publics’ perception of messages conveyed through media (Rubin & Perse, 1987), but also leads to behavioral outcomes such as developing peer communication about what the media represented (McLeod, Daily, Guo, Eveland, Bayer, Yang & Wang, 1996).

Social media has become an important resource for publics to look for information and meet their requirements of developing interpersonal relationships (Men & Muralidharan, 2017; Men & Tsai, 2013). The more publics depend on social media to receive information that they are interested in, the more likely they develop discussions or express their own opinions through social media, including negative ones. According to the social learning theory, publics would imitate the attitudes and behaviors they learnt from social media (Wang et al., 2012), which is also a goal of publics’ media usage (i.e., follow community norms to behave appropriately). Considering social media serves as an important platform in publics’ socialization process and its effects on publics’ attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, this study incorporates social media dependency as an antecedent of publics’ negative peer communication behavior. The following hypothesis was proposed.
H1: Social media dependency positively influences negative peer communication about companies on social media.

**Tie strength.** Tie strength is the extent of the relationship that an individual has with other members in a network (Mittal, Huppertz, & Khare, 2008; Wang et al., 2012). Tie strength could be categorized into two types, namely, strong or weak (Granovetter, 1973). Strong tie strength refers to close relationships with friends or relatives, which means that people have strong trust and dependency on their peers, whereas weak tie strength refers to casual relationships with acquaintances (Pigg & Crank, 2004).

Studies proved that “tie strength among peers is positively associated with peer communication” (Wang et al., 2012, p.201). The closeness of tie strength would affect the extent to which peers can influence one’s attitudes and behaviors. Peers with strong tie strength are more likely to be treated as trustful and convey useful information to receivers and therefore have more power than peers with weak tie strength (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2008). According to Men and Muralidharan (2017), strong ties with peers can promote peers to engage more in peer communication. In this sense, this study proposes that one is more likely to share negative experiences about companies with peers whom he or she has strong tie strength than those with weak tie strength.

H2: Tie strength with peers positively influences negative peer communication about companies on social media.

**Perceived reputation of companies.** The present study defined the company reputation as a series of assessments that can measure a company’s ability to provide beneficial values, represent the company and stakeholders (Fombrun, Gardberg & Sever, 2000), and differentiate the company from competitors in the market (Fombrun & Van Riel, 1997). Barnett, Jermier, and
Lafferty (2006) provided three corresponding clusters to consider company reputation as a kind of asset, awareness, and assessment. Hong and Yang (2009) argued that there are three types of dimensions associated with company reputation: social expectation, corporate personality, and trust.

Scholars studied the relationship between corporate reputation and peer communication. When people have a positive perception of a company, they may be less likely to convey negative comments (Lau & Ng, 2001). Publics would attribute the blame to other factors rather than the company because publics may attempt to avoid conflict with the positive perception that the general public hold toward the company (Folkes, Koletsky & Graham, 1987). By contrast, if people perceive the company negatively, they may express their dissatisfaction and blame the corporate as the one being at fault (Folkes, 1984; Lau & Ng, 2001). Given that perceived reputation of a company can affect publics’ behaviors and attitudes, reputation is considered a predictor of publics’ NPC behavior in this study. The following hypothesis was proposed:

**H3:** Perceived reputation of a company is negatively associated with negative peer communication about the company on social media.

**Interaction with companies on social media.** Companies increasingly spend money on social media to interact and maintain relationships with publics (Belleghem, Eenhuizen, & Veris, 2011). More than half of social media users follow social media pages of companies, and publics are willing to spend time on interacting with companies online (Drury, 2008). Publics’ previous interactions with a company were regarded as an important factor that can influence people’s attitudes and behaviors toward the information related to the company (Calder et al., 2009). People who have rich interactions with a company would become highly knowledgeable
about the company and consider the company as reliable and authentic (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

When publics interact with social media pages of a company, they would receive information or be involved with advertisements published by the company. People with high engagement with a company would pay attention to the company-related information. By interacting with the social media pages of a company, publics can directly obtain information about the company and discuss them with peers on social media (Stafford & Canary, 1991). As a result, when people have increasing interactions with a company, they would consistently receive information about the company and regard themselves as members of the company’s online community, which may decrease their intentions to initiate negative discussion about the company on social media (Lau & Ng, 2001). People’s trust, satisfaction, and commitment to a company are positively associated with their interactions with the company on social media (Men & Tsai, 2013). It has been found that publics are less likely to be persuaded by negative information about a company when they are highly involved with the company (Lau & Ng, 2001). Given that social media interaction with a company can influence people’s communication behavior, this study predicted that the more publics interact with a company on social media, they less likely they develop NPC about the company on social media. The following hypothesis was proposed:

H4: Interaction with social media pages of a company is negatively associated with negative peer communication about the company on social media.

**Relational Outcomes on OPRs**

The socialization process can explain the development of OPRs. Publics may form negative impressions of a company because of a negative conversation with peers about that company, which is a process of modeling. In other cases, if an individual receives punishment
(e.g., exclusion from the group) due to a close relationship with a company, that individual may choose to suspend the relationship to regain identification with the group, which can be viewed as a process of reinforcement (Men & Muralidharan, 2017).

This study intends to examine how peers serve as socialization agents and how negative peer communication on social media influences the outcomes of OPRs.

**Effects on OPRs.** Maintaining a consistent and beneficial relationship with key publics is an important task for companies (Canary & Spitzberg, 1989). Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined OPRs as a status between an organization and its target public; actions from either side can affect the “economic, social, cultural, and political well-being” of the other side (p.160). Huang (2001) considered OPRs as the extent to which “the organization and its public trust one another, agree that one has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another” (p.12).

Hon and Gruning (1999) proposed four relational factors of OPRs, namely, *control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment*, which can be considered as the outcomes of OPRs in most contexts. Other scholars agreed that a relationship should include different relational dimensions (e.g., Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Canary & Spitzberg, 1989; Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Control mutuality was defined as the point when parties agree that both sides in the relationship can influence each other (Hon & Gruning, 1999; Stafford & Canary, 1991). The study conducted by Huang (2001) showed that control mutuality is the most important dimension for OPRs and could greatly influence the strategies for organizational crises. Hon and Gruning (1999) defined trust as “one party’s level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party” (p. 14). Trust is an important factor for public relations. Public trust is critical for
organizational development and for individuals to cultivate interpersonal relationships (Stafford & Canary, 1991). The relational satisfaction means one party holds favorable attitudes toward each other because of the reinforcement of positive expectations (Hon & Gruning, 1999). Relational satisfaction is widely considered as a critical variable to measure the relationship quality and a benchmark to maintain effective relationships (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Relational commitment means that one party values the relationship and is willing to maintain and improve the quality of the relationship (Hon & Gruning, 1999). This definition requires that the commitment in OPRs should be both effective and continuous (Huang, 2001).

**Effects of negative peer communication on OPRs.** Negative communication behavior about a company can affect publics’ perceptions of the relationships with the company (Moon & Rhee, 2013). Communication behavior can be categorized into three parts: information acquisition, information selection, and information transmission (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Information transmission is related to the effects of peer communication because it is a process wherein publics can spread their opinion about a company, and can also be regarded as a behavioral antecedent of relational management between publics and companies (Kim & Rhee, 2011). When publics have unsatisfying experiences with a company, they may hold negative attitudes toward the company and are likely to develop negative discussion about the company with peers (Calder et al., 2009; Lau & Ng, 2001; Weinberger et al., 1981). According to the socialization and social learning theory, peers provide publics important information, opinions, and social norms, leading publics to behave appropriately to be socialized in the community (Wang et al., 2012). Publics can be influenced by and imitate the attitudes transmitted by peers to attain group identification (Chu & Sung, 2015).
Given that peers are important socialization agents, and peer communication can greatly influence publics’ attitudes and behaviors, this study predicts that negative peer communication also has such effects. To be specific, this study will examine how negative peer communication about companies on social media influence OPRs based on the four relational outcomes: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment.

H5: Negative peer communication about companies on social media can negatively influence the quality of OPRs.

The relationship between company reputation and OPRs could be reciprocal. Scholars have indicated the positive effects of OPRs on organizational reputation (e.g., Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002; Yang, 2007). For example, Hong and Yang (2011) argued that when publics develop quality relationships with an organization, they tend to perceive the organization more favorably. Similarly, Men (2015) proposed that the relationship between employee and organizations can positively influence employee’s perceived reputation of organizations.

Other studies demonstrated that perceived reputation of a company can influence publics’ perceptions of their relationships with the company (e.g., Ahearne, Bhattacharya & Gruen, 2005; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002). For example, research has shown that if publics are satisfied with what the company represents, they tend to support the company (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003; Hong & Yang, 2009). Along the line, this present study examined reputation as an antecedent factor, which could influence the quality of OPRs. The following hypothesis was proposed:

H6: Perceived reputation of companies is positively associated with the quality of OPRs.

Building relationships with publics on social media are considered to be a most important goal for companies when creating social media pages (Michaelidou, Siamagka &
Christodoulides, 2011). Interactions between companies and publics on social media is a two-way process rather than one dimensional (Drury, 2008). Companies not only spread messages on social media, rather they receive and exchange information with publics. Thus, the advantage of interacting with publics via social media lies in its ability to develop long-term rather than immediate relationships (Drury, 2008). Interactions with a company on social media effectively improve publics’ perceptions of the company. Favorable perceptions of the company can inspire publics to develop positive relationships with the company (Gao & Feng, 2016). Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H7: Interaction with social media pages of a company is positively associated with the quality of OPRs.

Based on the above discussion, the conceptual model of the study can be proposed as follows:

Figure 2-1. Proposed conceptual model
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The sample collection focused on social media users in the US. An online survey was conducted to test the hypotheses. Those social media users who discussed the negative aspects of a company with their peers on social media were recruited as participants via MTurk. Given that this online survey tool includes Internet users from various demographic backgrounds (Men & Muralidharan, 2017), the data collected by MTurk are deemed representative of social media users. The dichotomous screening question, “Have you ever discussed with your peers on social media about your bad experiences with a company?” was used to exclude unqualified participants from the sample. Those participants who answered “yes” for the screening questions were directed to an online questionnaire on Qualtrics and received $1 as a reward for completing the survey.

The participants were required to name the company that they had most recently negatively discussed about with their peers on social media. This study aims to examine the process of peer communication and to determine to what extent NPC affects OPRs. To this end, the participants were asked about their connections with their peers on social media, the degree of their dependence on social media, the perceived reputation of the company that they had negatively discussed about with their peers on social media, their previous social media interactions with this company, and the effects of NPC on OPRs. At the end of the survey, the participants were required to answer questions related to their background, including their age, gender, and income.

The data were collected from December 2017 to January 2018, and 548 responses were received. Among them, 447 respondents answered “yes” to the screening question, thereby
suggesting that these participants had experiences in negatively discussing a company with their peers on social media. After data cleaning, a total of 356 valid and complete responses were eventually used for the analysis.

**Measures**

This study adopted existing measurements from previously published literature and made some adaptations to accommodate the context of negative peer communication on social media. All participants were required to recall and indicate the name of a company that they had negatively discussed with their peers on social media most recently and answer the questions based on their previous experiences with this company.

**Independent variables.** The social media dependency was measured by four items adopted from Men and Tsai (2013); These items were: “I would rather spend my leisure time on social media than someplace else,” “I could easily do without using any type of social media for a given day, (reverse coded)” “Using social media is one of the most important things that I do each day,” and “If social media weren’t working, I would really miss it” (α = .82).

Tie strength with peers was measured by four items from the study conducted by Wang et al. (2012). The four items were: “I would share my personal confidences with my peers,” “I would spend some free time socializing with my peers,” “I would perform a large favor for my peers,” and “My peers perform large favors for me” (α = .78).

The perceived reputation of the company was measured by the Reputation Quotient proposed by Fombrun, Gardberg, and Sever (2010). The Reputation Quotient has six indexes: emotional appeal, products and services, financial performance, vision and leadership, workplace environment, and social responsibility. This study adopted six items from the Reputation Quotient to indicate the six indexes. Participants were asked to answer these questions by considering the companies they have negatively discussed with peers on social media. The items
included “I have a good feeling about that company” “That company offers high quality products and services,” “That company recognizes and take advantage of market opportunities,” “That company looks like good place to work for,” “That company bears social and environmental responsibility,” “That company has a strong record of profitability” (α = .82).

The interaction with the company on social media was measured by seven items adopted from Men and Tsai (2013) and Men and Muralidharan (2017). The seven items included two dimensions: consumption and contribution. The dimension of content-consumption was measured by three items; these items are: “How frequently would you watch videos on that company’s social media pages” “How frequently would you view pictures on that company’s social media pages” and “How frequently would you read that company’s posts, user comments, or product reviews.” Four items were used to measure the level of content-contribution; these items are: “How frequently would you engage in conversations on that company’s social media pages” “How frequently would you share that company’s posts on your own social media pages” “How frequently would you recommend that company’s social media pages to your peers on social media” and “How frequently would you upload the company-related pictures, videos, or audio on social media”. The overall reliability of this scale is good (α = .93). Similarly, participants were asked to answer these questions based on the company they had negatively discussed with peers on social media.

This study measured the core scale of negative peer communication by adapting four items from Wang et al. (2012) and Lau and Ng (2001). The items were: “I talked with peers about my unsatisfying experiences with that company on social media,” “I discussed with my peers about my negative experience with that company on social media,” and “I had a strong urge to tell others about my negative attitudes or bad experiences about that company”, and
“Approximately how often did you tell about your unsatisfying experiences with that company with peers on social media” ($\alpha = .73$).

**Dependent variables.** The four relational outcomes, namely, trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, and commitment, were measured by a total of 18 items adopted from Hon and Gruning (1999). All items were scored on a seven-point Likert scale that ranges from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7),

The measures of trust included four items: “That company would be concerned about people like me when it makes important decisions,” “That company can be relied upon to keep its promises,” “I feel very confident about that company’s skills,” and “That company doesn’t have the ability to accomplish what it said it will do” (reversed coded; $\alpha = .85$).

The control mutuality was measured by four items: “That company and people like me are attentive to what the other says,” “That company really listens to opinions from people like me,” “I believe that people like me have influence on the decision-makers of that company,” and “That company won’t cooperate with people like me” (reversed coded; $\alpha = .83$).

The measure of relational satisfaction was composed of five items: “I am happy with that company,” “Both that company and I benefit from the relationships,” “Generally speaking, I enjoy dealing with that company,” “I am not pleased with the relationship that company has established with me,” (reversed coded) and “That company failed to satisfy my needs” (reversed coded; $\alpha = .88$).

The relational commitment was measured by the following five items: “I feel that that company is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me,” “There is a long-lasting bond between that company and me,” “Compared to other companies, I value my relationship with that company more,” “I don’t feel a sense of loyalty to that company,” (reversed coded) and “I
have no desire to have a relationship with that company” (reversed coded; $\alpha = .87$). See Appendix A for description of each item in detail.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

The average age of participants was in the range between 26-34, and 45.5\% \( (n = 162) \) of the participants were male and 54.2\% \( (n = 193) \) were female. 75.2\% of the participants had at least college degrees, and about 77\% of them reported an income of less than 70,000 dollars before taxes last year. Most of participants (69.9\%, \( n = 248 \)) were White/Caucasian, 10.4\% \( (n = 37) \) were African-American, and 8.4\% \( (n = 30) \) were Asian/Asian-American. These participants spent an average of 3 hours on social media per day \( (M=2.97, SD=1.51) \), with 28.9\% \( (n = 103) \), 25.6\% \( (n = 91) \), 32.3\% \( (n = 115) \), and 13.2\% \( (n = 47) \) spending more than 3 hours, 2–3 hours, 1–2 hours, and less than 1 hour per day, respectively. In terms of frequency of discussing a company with their peers on social media, 53.1\% \( (n = 189) \) of the participants answered “Occasionally” or “Sometimes,” 35% answered “Very Rarely” or “Rarely,” and 10.1% answered “Frequently” or “Very Frequently.” In terms of the social media platforms that participants used to discuss companies with peers, Facebook was the most often used platform, followed by Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, and YouTube.

Descriptive Analysis

The results of the descriptive statistics (Table 1) showed that the participants in this study had a high level of negative peer communication with companies on social media \( (M = 5.21, SD = .95, n = 356) \). In terms of the individual-level antecedents of NPC, the participants reported a medium level of social media dependency \( (M = 3.54, SD = 1.29, n = 356) \) and a relatively high level of tie strength \( (M = 4.82, SD = 1.09, n = 356) \). These results indicated that the average participants neutrally depended on social media but had relatively strong ties with peers. In terms of corporate-level antecedents of NPC, medium to low ratings were observed regarding publics’
perceived reputation of companies ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.19$, $n = 356$) and their interactions with these companies on social media ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 1.36$, $n = 356$). In general, such ratings demonstrated that the participants held neutral beliefs regarding the reputation of these companies and rarely interacted with these companies’ social media pages. Regarding the four variables of OPRs, the participants reported medium to low levels of trust ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.31$, $n = 356$), control mutuality ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.31$, $n = 356$), relational satisfaction ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.38$, $n = 356$), and relational commitment ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.35$, $n = 356$). This result indicated that the participants tended to develop unfavorable relationships with the company that they had negatively discussed with peers on social media.

Table 4-1. Descriptive statistics of variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Label</th>
<th>Number of measurement items</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Social media dependency</td>
<td>SMD</td>
<td>4 items</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tie strength</td>
<td>TS</td>
<td>4 items</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Perceived reputation of the company</td>
<td>RPT</td>
<td>6 items</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Interaction with the company on social media</td>
<td>INT</td>
<td>7 items</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Negative peer communication</td>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>4 items</td>
<td>5.21</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Trust</td>
<td>TRU</td>
<td>4 items</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Control mutuality</td>
<td>CNT</td>
<td>4 items</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Relational satisfaction</td>
<td>SAT</td>
<td>5 items</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Relational commitment</td>
<td>CMT</td>
<td>5 items</td>
<td>2.62</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of SEM

Structural equation model (SEM) was used to test the model presented in Figure 1. In this model, social media dependency, tie strength, perceived reputation of the company, interaction with the company on social media, and negative peer communication were considered observed
variables. Organization-public relationships was specified as a latent variable with four indicators, namely trust, control mutuality, relational satisfaction, and relational commitment. AMOS 24.0 was used for the model estimation.

The test of the original model did not indicate a very adequate fit to the data: $\chi^2(19) = 94.22$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 4.96$, TLI = .90, CFI = .95, RMSEA = .11 (95% CI = .09, .13), and RMR = .06. According to Barbara (2001), it is necessary to add covariance among error terms to explain common factors of two items, and Byrne (2010) also argued that error covariance within the same construct can address the redundant content. Therefore, one error covariance was added based on model modification indices. ¹ The results of the modified structural model indicated a satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2(18) = 51.04$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.84$, TLI = .95, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .07 (95% CI = .05, .10), and RMR = .05.

Bootstrapping ($N = 2000$ samples) was used to address the non-normality of the data using the maximum likelihood method with the bias-corrected 95% confidence (Barbara, 2001). The bootstrap results did not deviate from those based on normal theory. None of the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for the significant paths included zero, indicating that the significant paths in Figure 2 remained significant in the bootstrapping process and the non-significant paths remained non-significant.

To identify the best fitting model, one theoretically possible nested structural equation model was used to compare with the hypothesized model. In this nested model, the direct paths from perceived reputation of the company and the interaction with the company’s social media

¹ The error covariance between the trust and control mutuality was .25. This study added covariance between the error terms of the two items since their modification indices was relatively large (M.I. = 38.5, CFI = .947). After adding the covariance, the model indicated a satisfactory fit to the data (CFI = .977).
pages to OPRs were removed so that NPC completely mediated the effects of four predictors on the quality of OPRs. Results showed that the alternative model did not fit the data: \( \chi^2 (20) = 335.51, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 16.78, \text{TLI} = .60, \text{CFI} = .78, \text{RMSEA} = .21 \) (95% CI = .19, .23), and RMR = .38. Therefore, the hypothesized model was selected as the better model: \( \Delta df = 2(20 - 18), \Delta \chi^2 = 284.47 \) (335.51 - 51.04), \( p < .001, \text{CFI} \) (from .78 to .98), RMR (from .38 to .05), RESEA (from .21 to .07).

![Diagram](image)

Figure 4-1. Results of SEM analysis

*Note.* For the sake of brevity, covariances among variables and error terms of indicators of latent variables were omitted from the figure. Coefficients are standardized regression weights.

*\( ^* p < .05, ^{**} p < .001. \)

**Hypotheses Testing**

This study proposed seven hypotheses, and six of them were supported by the data. The results of each hypothesis were reported here.

H1 predicted the positive relationship between publics’ social media dependency and behavior of NPC toward companies. The results indicated a significance of this hypothesis (\( \beta = .10, p = .05 \)) with a small effect size, therefore signifying that publics’ social media dependency was slightly associated with the behavior of NPC toward companies through social
media. Similarly, H2 proposed the positive relationship between publics’ tie strength with peers and behavior of NPC toward companies on social media. Figure 2 showed that this hypothesis was completely supported by the data ($\beta = .33, p < .001$), thereby suggesting that publics with stronger ties with peers on social media were more likely to develop negative discussion on companies with peers.

H3 and H4 predicted the negative effects of corporate factors, namely, publics’ perception of the reputation of a company and their social media interaction with a company, on publics’ negative peer communication about the company on social media. The results supported H3 ($\beta = -.19, p < .001$), which demonstrated that the more favorable reputation that publics had with a company, the less likely they developed negative peer communication about the company on social media. Interestingly, H4 was not supported by the data ($\beta = .04, p > .05$), thereby indicating that publics’ social media interaction with a company failed to influence their negative discussion of the organization with peers on social media.

H5 proposed the negative effects of publics’ negative peer communication about companies on the quality of OPRs. This hypothesis was completely supported by the data ($\beta = -.17, p < .001$). Therefore, publics’ negative discussion of a company with peers on social media was negatively associated with their relationships with the company.

H6 and H7 predicted the positive effects of publics’ perception of the reputation of a company and their interaction with the social media pages of the company regarding the quality of OPRs. Both hypotheses were supported by the data. In particular, publics’ perception of the reputation of a company showed a significant positive effect on their relationships with the
company ($\beta = .62, p < .001$). Moreover, publics’ interactions with the company on social media exerted positive effects on OPRs ($\beta = .27, p < .001$).

\footnote{A mediation model was run using 5,000 bootstrapped samples and 95\% bias-adjusted confidence intervals. The indirect effect of reputation of a company on OPR through the pathway of NPC was statistically significant ($\beta = .06, p < .001$).}
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the antecedents of NPC about companies on social media and its effects on OPRs from the perspective of socialization theory. This study focused on two groups of predictors, namely, individual factors and corporate factors, which can influence the extent of NPC on social media. According to the results, tie strength with peers and social media dependency were both positively associated with NPC, the perceived reputation of a company was negatively associated with NPC, and the social media interactions with a company was not associated with NPC. The major finding of this study (i.e., the NPC about a company on social media negatively affected OPRs) was consistent with the results of previous studies that confirmed a significant relationship between peer communication and OPRs (e.g., Chu & Kim, 2011; Men & Muralidharan, 2017; Hong & Yang, 2011). Publics’ social interactions with and their perceptions toward the reputation of a company can also affect the quality of OPRs.

Individual-level Predictors of NPC

Tie strength was identified as an important antecedent of the effect of NPC on social media. A closer tie strength among peers indicated a higher likelihood for these people to develop negative discussions about a company on social media. From the social networking perspective, tie strength with peers was an important factor that influences the decision of publics whether or not to exchange information through social media (Chu & Kim, 2011). Specifically, people were more willing to share their emotions and experiences, including negative ones, with close others who they perceived as reliable, thereby highlighting a significant relationship between tie strength and public interactions on social media (Chu & Kim, 2011; Men & Muralidharan, 2017; Wang et al., 2012).
Social media dependency had significant positive effect on the tendency for publics to engage in NPC on social media. This finding can be attributed to the fact that those users with higher social media dependency tend to engage more in online networking with peers (Chu & Kim, 2011). Therefore, as a form of social media engagement, NPC can be positively influenced by the social media dependency of publics. In this case, those people who depend more on social media are more likely to use social media as the platform to express their negative attitudes about a company with their peers. However, it is worth noticing that this study only revealed a small effect of social media dependency on NPC. Even though the social media dependency of publics can influence their willingness to receive information from social media channels (Men & Muralidharan, 2017), this factor seemed not a major driver of their tendency to engage in negative discussions about a company on social media.

**Corporate-level Predictors of NPC and Their Effects on OPRs**

The better publics perceived the reputation of a company, the less likely they developed an urge to negatively discuss about this company with their peers on social media. This negative relationship supported with the findings of previous studies that revealed how having a favorable reputation can lead to positive attitudes and discussions about a company (Dye, 2000; Fombrun et al., 2000; Hong & Yang, 2009). The perceived reputation of a company also had direct positive effect on the quality of OPRs, thereby suggesting a positive relationship between publics’ reputation of an organization and the relationships of publics with this organization (Hong & Yang, 2011; Moon & Yang, 2015).

The interactions of publics with the social media pages of a company were not related to their tendency to engage in NPC about such company on social media. Publics must become passionate about a company before engaging in such discussions (Heller & Parasnis, 2011). Interacting with the social media pages of a company may not necessarily lead to favorable
perceptions toward this company. In this case, the negative attitudes of publics toward a company and their urge to start negative discussions about such company with their peers cannot be mitigated by the social media activities of this company (Moon & Yang, 2015). Interestingly, Men and Muralidharan (2017) found that those people who frequently communicated with a company through social media tended to frequently discuss about this company with their peers. These contrasting arguments demonstrated that interacting with a company on social media can motivate people into discussing about this company with their peers but cannot influence their tendency to engage in NPC about the company. Therefore, the predictors of NPC must be distinguished from those of peer communication.

Although this study did not find any significant association between the social media interactions of publics with a company and their NPC behavior, the findings supported those previous studies that highlighted the important role of social media engagement in cultivating the relationships between companies and publics (Bortree, 2011). Specifically, those people who frequently interacted with a company through social media tended to develop better OPRs. A higher frequency of social media interaction with a company can also provide a person with more information about such company and push him/her into interacting with this company on a personal level (Men & Tsai, 2014). This “interpersonal communication” pushed publics into considering a company as a trusted and integral part of their social networks, thereby fostering positive and stable relationships between these parties (Hong & Yang, 2009).

**The Effect of NPC on Relational Outcomes of OPRs**

Some studies suggested that peer communication about a company can influence the attitude and behavior of publics toward this company (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Concurring with previous research, this study showed that those people who frequently engage in NPC about a company on social media (or having a strong urge to tell others about their negative attitudes
toward this company) were less likely to develop favorable relationships with such company (i.e., distrust, less-controlled mutuality, dissatisfaction, and relationship dissolution), thereby suggesting a negative relationship between NPC and its effects on the quality of OPRs.

According to social learning theory, peers can convey cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors to learners, and interacting with peers can greatly influence the cognitive and behavioral attitudes of publics (Ward, 1974). Moon and Yang (2015) examined the significant mediating role of negative peer communication in terminating the relationship between publics and companies. The findings of this study revealed that NPC about companies negatively influenced the relationships of publics with companies, which can be attributed to publics’ social learning process (Wang et al., 2012). In particular, NPC about companies intensified publics’ distrust and dissatisfaction with companies. In addition, theory of negativity bias posited that people’s evaluations can be strongly influenced by negative activation (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994; Ito et al., 1998). Also, the affective intelligence theory indicated that when people process (negative) information that is inconsistent with their previous positive evaluations, they may result in negative responses such as anger (Redlawsk et al., 2007). Therefore, as a type of negative activation, NPC can influence publics’ perceptions of companies, thereby leading to dissatisfactory OPRs.

**Theoretical Implications**

Three theoretical implications can be drawn from the findings. First, this study contributed to the studies about social media engagement. Many studies focused on the effects of consumption-related peer communication. For example, Wang (2012) studied how peer communication on social media affected purchase intentions of consumers. Given that NPC as an important form of social media engagement has not been fully examined, this study focused on publics’ negative engagement on social media. It examined the NPC about companies on social
media based on socialization and negativity bias theories. Therefore, this study contributed to the public relations literature by enhancing the theoretical understanding about negative social media engagement.

Second, this study explored the antecedents of NPC in the social media context. To be specific, it incorporated the individual- (tie strength and social media dependency) and corporate-level predictors (social media interactions with and perceived reputation of a company) of NPC. By testing four possible indicators of NPC that were adapted from previous research, this study revealed that the predictors of general peer communication, which had also been identified from previous research, could not properly explain NPC behavior (e.g., social media interactions with a company was not related to the NPC behavior of publics), thereby suggesting that the indicators of NPC differed from those of other networking behaviors (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). Therefore, future research could discuss NPC independently and its other possible predictors. Specifically, the relationship between social media engagement with companies and NPC about companies should be further examined.

Third, this study supplemented the organization–publics relationship literature in the arena of social media. Only few studies have examined how OPRs are influenced by NPC. As an outcome of the socialization process, the negative discussions about a company had significant negative effects on the quality of OPRs (i.e., trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, and commitment). By discussing the corporate-level predictors of OPRs (i.e., perceived reputation of interaction with a company on social media) and highlighting such relationships as relational effects of NPC, this study called for further research on NPC from the perspective of OPRs management. In terms of public relations management, this study emphasized that the NPC behavior of publics should not be underestimated because such behavior could greatly reduce the
quality of OPRs. Therefore, this study contributed to the relationship management, publics’ communication management, and social media management literature.

**Practical Implications**

This study also offered important practical insights for public relations practitioners and social media operators. First, this study provided implications for public relations professionals by discussing those factors that might influence the NPC about companies. Given that publics can easily discuss about a company with their peers on social media, studying those factors that may lead to NPC behavior can allow company practitioners to proactively monitor NPC on social media (Wang et al., 2012). The findings of this study could also enhance the sensitivity of companies to the changes in publics’ attitude, help them take advantage of social media to promote positive peer communication, and mitigate those factors that may lead to NPC. The significant effects of tie strength on NPC behaviors also warranted the attention of companies. Given that people were more willing to express their negative opinions about a company with their close peers, practitioners must also pay attention to any negative information that publics convey through social network websites in which publics may have closer tie strength with their contacts. The negative information shared by influential people needs special attention because of its potential to create a wide range of negative discussion.

Second, this study provided implications for social media practitioners by highlighting the important effects of social media on the NPC behavior and relationships of publics with a company. On the one hand, the positive relationship between social media dependency and NPC behavior suggested that publics tended to share their opinions about a company on social media because such platforms allowed them to freely express their negative attitudes or unsatisfactory experiences. On the other hand, social media provided companies with the platform on which they can reach out to publics (Calder et al., 2009; Mersey, Malthouse, & Calder, 2010). The
findings of this study supported the notion that frequently interacting with a company on social media could foster favorable relationships between organizations and publics. Therefore, companies must develop effective social media strategies that can help them engage with publics and cultivate positive relationships (Chu & Kim, 2011; Mersey et al., 2010). Social media managers must also strengthen the social influence of their companies on social media and increase the frequency of their interactions with those people who rarely interact with companies on social media (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007) to improve their company image and to encourage publics to hold positive discussions about their company on their social networks (Brown et al., 2007). Social media operators should also choose suitable social media platforms to fulfill different functions according to the needs of their target publics. For example, companies may analyze the demographics and social media dependency level of publics to further understand the needs and features of their target consumers (Men & Muralidharan, 2017).

In addition, given that those people who positively perceived the reputation of a company tended to avoid NPC and actively attempted to build positive relationships with such company, social media operators can produce content that build the reputation of their companies. Such content may be related to their selection as one of the 100 Best Companies to Work For by Forbes (Hong & Yang, 2011).

Third, the NPC about a company can greatly influence the cultivation of OPRs. Given that social media have informational and social functions, social media practitioners must not only provide information about the company itself or its products but also use the platform to receive feedback and evoke public empathy, so they can be sensitive about changes in publics’ attitudes. Therefore, public relations practitioners can monitor the NPC on social media and actively notice the changes in publics’ attitudes, determine those factors that may lead to public
dissatisfaction, understand publics’ interests, and incorporate the above factors to mitigate the effects of NPC (Wang et al., 2012).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study presented some theoretical and practical insights, some limitations need to be addressed in future research. First, this study only discussed several antecedents of NPC in the social media context, including two personal factors (tie strength and social media dependency) and two corporate factors (perceived reputation of a company and interaction with a company on social media). Other potential factors, such as the demographic and psychological features of publics, can be investigated in future NPC research. Moreover, the different features of various social media platforms may influence the applicability of this study findings. Therefore, future studies may examine the effects of different types of social media on the NPC behavior of publics and investigate to what extent NPC influences the OPRs on different social media platforms.

Second, this study did not properly examine the potential reciprocal relationships among the items. For example, some studies have discussed the effects of OPRs on peer communication and word of mouth behaviors (e.g., Hong & Yang, 2009; Kim & Rhee, 2011) as well as the effects of NPC on the perceived reputation and interaction of publics with a company (e.g., East et al., 2008; Lee, Park & Han, 2008). The survey method was unable to examine the potential causal relationships. Future research can test the reputation of companies and their social media interactions as the effect of NPC about companies on social media using other methods such as experiments. Qualitative methods such as interview and case studies can also be used to offer in-depth understanding of NPC and its impacts on OPRs.

Third, although the participants were asked to name a company that they had negatively discussed about with their peers on social media, different company categories may have varying
effects on NPC (Wang et al., 2012). Therefore, future research may specify the types of companies when discussing the possible predictors and effects of NPC on the socialization model. Fourth, given the positive effects of publics–company social media interactions on OPRs, future research can explore how to mitigate the negative effects of NPC by taking advantage of social media. Doing so can enrich the literature on socialization theory and improve the extant management strategies for handling NPC.
Thank you for your participation in this survey about negative peer communication on social media and relationships between publics and companies. In this study, you will be asked to answer questions about your peer communication experiences on social media and how negative peer communication about companies influences your attitudes and relationships with the companies.

Your honest answers will be greatly valued, and your identity will be kept confidential. This survey should take about 10 minutes to complete. There are no anticipated risks or benefits. The data collected in the survey will be used for statistical analysis purposes.

You can return to previous questions anytime. When you answer all questions and finish the survey, you will get $1 as a reward, but you may discontinue the survey at any time without any penalty. Your MTurk Worker ID will be used only for the purpose of awarding compensation, and will not be shared with anyone outside the research team. It will not be linked with your survey responses and will be removed from the data set once compensation has been made. (Note that your Worker ID can be linked to your Amazon user’s public profile page, so you may wish to restrict what information you choose to share in your public profile.)

The IRB study number of this survey is IRB201703200, and the IRB02 contact information is irb2@ufl.edu. If you have any questions related to the survey or this research study, please email the researcher Yufan Qin at qinyf1995@ufl.edu.

Thank you very much for your participation.

Note: On clicking “Next” you agree to participate in and start the survey.
Filter Questions:

Please answer the following questions based on your experiences.

(Note: Social media examples include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, blogs, or any platforms where you can share your daily activities and interests.)

Have you discussed any unsatisfying experiences or negative attitudes toward a company with peers (e.g., friends, colleagues) on social media? Y/N

(Participants who click Y will proceed to the following questions.)

PART I: Social Media Usage

1. Which of the following social media do you most often use to discuss companies with peers (e.g., friends, colleagues)?
   A. Facebook  B. Twitter  C. Instagram  D. You Tube  E. Snapchat  F. Instagram  G. LinkedIn  H. Flickr  I. Google +  J Pintrest  K. Wechat  L. Other (please specify).

2. Approximately how many hours do you spend on social media in a day?
   A. Less than 1 hour
   B. 1-2 hours
   C. 2-3 hours
   D. 3-4 hours
   E. 4-5 hours
   F. 5-6 hours
   G. More than 6 hours

3. How often do you discuss a company with peers on social media?
   A. Never
   B. Very Rarely
C. Rarely
D. Occasionally
E. Sometimes
F. Frequently
G. Very frequently

Negative Peer Communication

Please recall a company that you have negatively discussed with your peers (e.g., friends, colleagues) on social media most recently. Please indicate the name of that company:___________

(Note: Please remember this company you indicated and answer all the following questions based on your previous experiences with this company.)

Now, please answer the following questions based on your previous negative discussion about that specific company you had with your peers on social media. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

1. I talked with peers about my unsatisfying experiences with that company on social media.
2. I discussed with peers about my negative experiences with that company on social media.
3. I had a strong urge to tell others about my negative attitudes or bad experiences about that company.
4. Approximately how often did you tell about your unsatisfying experiences with that company with peers (e.g., your friends or colleagues) on social media?
   A. Never
   B. Very Rarely
C. Rarely
D. Occasionally
E. Sometimes
F. Frequently
G. Always

PARTII: Antecedents of Negative Peer Communication about Companies

Social Media Dependency

The following questions are about your social media dependency. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

1. I would rather spend my leisure time on social media than someplace else.
2. I could easily do without using any types of social media for a given day (reverse coded).
3. Using social media is one of the most important things that I do each day.
4. If the social media weren’t working, I would really miss it.

Tie Strength

The following questions are about your connection with your peers on social media. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

1. I would share my personal confidences with my peers.
2. I would spend some free time socializing with my peers.
3. I would perform a large favor for my peers.
4. My peers perform large favors for me.

Perceived Reputation of the Company
Please keep in mind that specific company that you have indicated above. The following questions are about your perceived reputation of that company that you have negatively discussed with peers on social media. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

1. I have a good feeling about that company.
2. That company offers high quality products and services.
3. That company recognizes and takes advantage of market opportunities.
4. That company looks like a good place to work for.
5. That company bears social and environmental responsibility.
6. That company has a strong record of profitability.

**Interaction with the Company on Social Media**

Please keep in mind that specific company that you have indicated above. The following questions are about your previous interactions with that company that you have negatively discussed with peers on social media. Please indicate how frequently you interact with that company on their social media pages (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) (1 = never, 7 = always)

1. Watching videos on that company’s social media pages.
2. Viewing pictures on that company’s social media pages.
3. Reading that company’s posts, user comments, or product reviews on social media.
4. Engaging in conversations on that company’s social media pages.
5. Sharing that company’s posts on your own social media pages.
6. Recommending that company’s social media pages to your peers on social media.
7. Uploading pictures, videos, or audio that are related to that company on social media.

**Part III: Outcomes of Negative Peer Communication with the Company**
Please keep in mind that specific company that you have indicated above. The following questions ask your relationships with that company that you have negatively discussed with peers on social media. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements: (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)

**Trust**

1. That company would be concerned about people like me when it makes important decisions.
2. That company can be relied upon to keep its promises.
3. I feel very confident about that company’s skills.
4. That company doesn’t have the ability to accomplish what it said it will do (reverse coded).

**Control Mutuality**

1. That company and people like me are attentive to what the other says.
2. That company really listens to opinions from people like me.
3. I believe that people like me have influence on the decision-makers of that company.
4. That company won’t cooperate with people like me (reverse coded).

**Relational Satisfaction**

1. I am happy with that company.
2. Both that company and I benefit from the relationship between the company and publics.
3. Generally speaking, I enjoy dealing with that company.
4. I am not pleased with the relationship that company has established with me (reverse coded).
5. That company failed to satisfy my needs (reverse coded).

**Relational Commitment**

1. I feel that that company is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me.
2. There is a long-lasting bond between that company and me.
3. Compared to other companies, I value my relationship with that company more.

4. I don’t feel a sense of loyalty to that company (reverse coded).

5. I have no desire to have a relationship with that company (reverse coded).

**Part-V: Demographic Information**

Following questions are about your demographic information. Please answer them by checking one option or filling in the blank. Be assured that all answers you provide will be kept confidential.

1. What is your age?
   - A. Under 13
   - B. 13-17
   - C. 18-25
   - D. 26-34
   - E. 35-54
   - F. 55-64
   - G. 65 or above

2. What is your gender?
   - A. Male
   - B. Female

3. What is your ethnicity?
   - A. White/Caucasian
   - B. African-American
   - C. American Indian/Alaska Native
   - D. Asian/Asian-American
E. Hispanic/Latino

F. Multiracial

G. Other (Please indicate_________)

4. What is your highest level of education (the degree you have earned or you are currently enrolled in)?

A. Did not finish high school

B. High School

C. Associates (2-Year College)

D. Bachelor (4-Year College Degree)

E. Masters

F. Doctorate

G. Other (Please indicate __________)

5. What is your annual income range before taxes last year?

A. Less than $10,000

B. $10,000 - $24,999

C. $25,000 - $39,999

D. $40,000 - $54,999

E. $55,000 - $69,999

F. $70,000 - $84,999

G. $85,000 - $99,999

H. $100,000 - $149,999

I. $150,000 or more
This is the end of the survey.

Thank you very much for your time and participation.
REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Yufan Qin was born in Jincheng, China in 1995. She completed her undergraduate education in Hunan Normal University in China and then joined University of Florida in the summer of 2016 to get her master’s degree. Her major is mass communication in the College of Journalism and Communications. She received her master’s degree in the spring of 2018 and will keep pursuing her doctorate degree in University of Florida.