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The internal communication role of the chief executive officer: Communication channels, style, and effectiveness

Linjuan Rita Men

Department of Public Relations, The University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the internal communication role of chief executive officers (CEOs) by examining their communication channels, style, and quality, as well as their influence on employee–organization relational outcomes. Results showed that CEOs most frequently use email and face-to-face channels to communicate with employees. The social media presence of CEOs positively and strongly correlates with their communication responsiveness and quality, as well as employee–organization relational outcomes. The responsive communication style of CEOs positively influences the quality of CEO communication, which subsequently affects employee relational outcomes. The assertive communication style of CEOs demonstrates a small significant positive effect on the quality of employee–organization relationships but nonsignificant effect on the quality of CEO communication. The significant theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Public relations and management communication scholars and practitioners have increasingly recognized the critical role of leadership in influencing the effectiveness of internal communication. On the one hand, leadership communication is a major component of the internal communication system of an organization (Men, 2014a,b; Whitworth, 2011), which influences employee attitudes and behaviors (Berger, 2008; Holladay & Coombs, 1993; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men & Stacks, 2013, 2014). On the other hand, leadership provides an important context and sets the tone for internal communication practice. This growing concern has sparked considerable research that examines the impact of supervisor leadership on building employee–organization relationships in the past decade. However, one facet of leadership communication that has been largely overlooked is that of top-level management, more specifically, the chief executive officer (CEO).

The innate linkage between CEOs and the organization has been widely acknowledged. CEOs personify the organization to internal and external stakeholders and act as the highest level corporate spokesperson (Park & Berger, 2004). The image and leadership charisma of the CEO as portrayed in the media could influence corporate reputation (Cravens, Oliver, & Ramamoorti, 2003). From an internal perspective, the support and participation of CEOs in communication programs affect the organizational standing and effectiveness of public relations functions (Grunig, 1993; Pincus, Rayfield, & Cozzens, 1991). Similarly, the symbolic leadership, power, and communication demonstrated by CEOs may influence employee attitudes, trust in leadership, and performance (Men, 2011; Park & Berger, 2004). The influential role of CEOs as “chief engagement officer” within the organization has drawn the increasing attention of communication professionals. The 2014 Edelman Trust

E-mail address: cicirita@gmail.com

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Barometer initially used the term “chief engagement officer” to highlight the pressing need for CEOs to come out of their offices, communicate with and engage their internal and external communities, and build personal relationships. Such rising concern with the communication function of CEOs appears in parallel with the development of social media, particularly with the penetration of digital platforms in the internal communication programs of organizations. The interactive, personal, empowering, and relational features of social media tools have blurred communication hierarchies within organizations (Men, 2014b). Thus, the power distance has been reduced, bringing CEOs into life and allowing them to communicate with their employees in a friendly, authentic, and informal manner. Moreover, the democratic spirit of social media with user-generated content encourages employees to articulate their opinions and concerns and voice alternative views, which can be heard by CEOs (Huang, Baptista, & Galliers, 2013; Men, 2014a). Therefore, emerging digital media fuels equal dialogues and builds the relationship between CEOs and employees.

Despite the growing professional interest and literature on the topic, few scholarly attempts have examined the channels, styles, or influence of the internal communication of CEOs on employee outcomes. Thus, this study aims to fill the research gap by investigating the CEO role in organizational internal communication in the social media era. In particular, the study examines the channels that are currently being used by CEOs to communicate with employees, social media use and presence of CEOs, different CEO communication styles, and more importantly, the effects of CEO communication styles on the relationship between employees and the organization.

2. Literature review

2.1. Roles of the CEO

Mintzberg (1973) identified 10 primary roles in which the CEO represents the company in interactions with various constituencies, namely, figurehead, leader, liaison, monitor, disseminator, spokesperson, entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator. The importance of CEOs in public relations and image building has long been recognized by academics and practitioners (Park & Berger, 2004). Grunig (1993) contended that CEOs as top leaders of the organization help define and embody the organizational image and personify the organization to internal and external stakeholders. A number of researchers have examined the role of CEOs as corporate spokespersons or public representatives (e.g., Graham, 1997; Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001; Park & Berger, 2004; Reidenbach & Pitts, 1986). For instance, Garbett (1988) noted that the CEO personality shapes the character and culture of the entire organization (Garbett, 1988; Hutton et al., 2001). Gaines-Ross (2000) stated that a favorable CEO image urges investors to purchase company stock, recommend the company as a reputable alliance partner, and maintain faith in the company during setbacks. However, compared to the immense interest in the role of CEOs in external relations, their contribution to internal communications has not gained considerable scholarly attention.

2.1.1. CEOs and internal communication

Executive leaders, particularly CEOs, play a unique organizational role. As the top leader of the organization, the CEO influences organizational direction, relations with key stakeholders, corporate reputation, and organizational effectiveness by establishing a collective purpose, communicating a vision, and managing the culture (Fanelli & Misangyi, 2006; Men, 2011; Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009; Waldmann, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001). CEOs likewise directly influence employee perceptions, attitudes, and performance through leadership and power (Park & Berger, 2004).

With regard to the public relations function, on the one hand, CEOs play the key “enabling” role; that is, they create an appropriate organizational context, thus allowing the public relations department to effectively manage the communication system (Grunig, 1993; Pincus et al., 1991). In other words, if the CEO doubts the value of public relations, the function will receive little support from top management and will be likely ineffective. On the other hand, CEOs can play the role of chief engagement officer internally and be directly involved with the communication efforts. For instance, CEOs often serve as the catalyst in forming the communication philosophy and style of the organization, establish management credibility to employees, engage in two-way communication, and use their personal influence and connections to foster trust (Men, 2011; Pincus et al., 1991). In fact, CEO communication is an indispensable part of organizational leadership communication. According to Pincus et al. (1991), employees desire a more open and closer relationship with top managers, particularly the CEO. The perceptions of employees toward top management are “closely linked to their overall perceptions of the organization as a place to work and the general state of the morale” (Pincus et al., 1991, p. 9).

However, the thrust of most scholarly works on leadership communication has been on immediate supervisor–subordinate communication and its effects on employee attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Men, 2014a,b; Pincus et al., 1991). Efforts that examine the role of the upper levels of management, particularly CEOs, in the organizational communication process, have been scant. Thus, the current study serves as one of the earliest empirical attempts to examine the internal communication role of CEOs. More specifically, this study aims to investigate the communication channels employed by CEOs in internal communication and their social media presence, as well as the impact of CEO communication style on perceived CEO communication quality and employee relational outcomes.

2.2. Internal communication channels

Each medium engages audiences in different ways and affects the scale and pace of communication (Men, 2014b). To date, various communication channels have been utilized by companies and leaders to communicate with employees, ranging from traditional print publications (e.g., newsletter, magazines, memos), phone calls, voicemails, and face-to-face communication, to Web 2.0 tools, such as intranet, blogs, instant messaging, and internal social networking sites (Crescenzo, 2011). Among these tools, face-to-face communication is often perceived as an optimal channel for communicating complex information because it facilitates immediate feedback, the use of natural language and multiple cues, and personal focus. Cameron and McCollum (1993) noted that the two-way nature of interpersonal communication channels, such as team meetings, group problem-solving sessions, and supervisor briefings, enhances management–employee relationships better than publications. Research has also consistently indicated that face-to-face communication is most preferred by employees in communicating with organizational leaders, followed by emails (Men, 2014b). Technological development has made email an indispensable part of the daily routine of employees.

With regard to CEO communication, Grubbs (1984) examined the external communication practices of 97 Fortune 500 CEOs and reported that CEOs reply most heavily on conventional oral and written media, such as letters and phone calls. However, from an internal communication perspective, Pincus et al. (1991) indicated that the majority of CEO communication efforts rely on interpersonal means. CEOs are most comfortable in face-to-face communication and believe that this mode is the most effective. They value employee feedback and use mostly informal channels to obtain it. Overall, Pincus et al. (1991) revealed that CEOs communicate frequently with employees through “management by walking around,” one-on-one meetings, articles in internal publications, group meetings with employees, speeches and memos, and phone calls, in that order.

The advent of the Web 2.0 era in the past decade has fundamentally changed the landscape of internal communication within organizations. Digital platforms, such as intranet, blogs, bulletin boards, instant messaging, and social networking sites, have been increasingly used by companies and organizational leaders to engage employees (Crescenzo, 2011; Men, 2014b). Although limited in carrying social information compared to face-to-face communication (Sheer, 2011), new media channels with rich features (e.g., webcams, embedded audio or video, commenting and sharing features, and online chat functions) facilitate complex information distribution. Moreover, social media channels with two-way, interactive/dialogical, communal, personal, and relational features (Men and Tsai, 2013) allow top leaders to listen closely to employees, respond in a timely manner, communicate in a genuine and personal fashion, and facilitate employee upward communication. Thus, the communication hierarchy within the organization is blurred, the power distance is shortened, and the CEO is brought into everyday life. According to a recent survey conducted by WeberShandwick (2014), the social media presence of CEOs can provide the company with a human face or personality, demonstrate innovation, and provide employees with an opportunity to communicate with the CEO. Moreover, CEO sociability can instill positive employee feelings, such as feeling inspired, technologically advanced, and proud.

To advance the understanding of how CEOs play internal communication roles and address the hype in the CEO use of social media, questions regarding the social media presence of CEOs as it relates to employee communication should be raised.

Q1: What communication channels do CEOs use most frequently to communicate with employees?

Q2: How strong is CEO presence on social media? How does CEO social media presence influence perceived communication quality and employee relational outcomes?

2.3. Communication style

According to Richmond (2002), “communicating effectively with different people on different topics and at different times requires flexible communication behaviors” (p. 105). Communication style (i.e., socio-communicative style) is a construct developed to illustrate the different skills an individual uses in initiating, adapting, and responding to interpersonal communication (Thomas, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1994). The communication style of an individual can prompt observers to “gain insight into the personality of individuals by taking note of their characteristic communication behaviors” (Thomas et al., 1994, p. 109).

Two dimensions, namely, assertiveness and responsiveness, are presumed to represent the core elements of communication style (Thomas et al., 1994). Assertive communicators “are able to initiate, maintain, and terminate conversations, according to their interpersonal goals” (p. 136). They act assertively to speak up for themselves, whether to make a request or express a feeling. Assertiveness focuses on the task dimension of relationships (Wheless & Lashbrook, 1987). Words that are commonly used to describe an assertive communicator include dominant, forceful, aggressive, and competitive. Most of these assertive characteristics are considered to be masculine qualities. By contrast, responsive communicators are more sensitive to others, listen to what others have to say, consider the feelings of others, and recognize their needs (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Responsiveness focuses on the relational dimension of relationships. A responsive communicator is characterized as being a good listener, responsive, empathetic, compassionate, understanding, friendly, warm, sincere, and interested. These qualities are generally considered to be feminine (McCroskey, & Richmond, 1996; Porter, Wrench, & Hoskinson, 2007).

Previous studies have examined the effects of assertive and responsive communication style in various contexts. For instance, the results of an early study of Norton and Warnick (1976) indicated that employee assertiveness is positively associated with his/her likelihood of emerging as a leader within the organization. In the education context, Wooten and McCroskey (1996) reported that student perceptions of instructor assertiveness and responsiveness are positively related to student perceptions of instructor trustworthiness. Aylor and Oppliger (2003) contended that students are more willing to communicate with highly responsive instructors and are more satisfied with their communication with highly responsive instructors. However, previous research findings on the effectiveness of assertive and responsive communication style seemed to be inconclusive. Each style has value, and no one style is necessarily better than the other, depending on the communication purpose and context (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). In the organizational setting, CEOs as the top leaders and chief engagement officers play multiple roles in the internal communication process. CEOs are expected to demonstrate a mix of assertive and responsive communication styles. Considering the limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of CEO communication style, this study aims to fill the research gap by providing insights into how assertive and responsive CEO communication would influence employee evaluation of CEO communication quality and employee relational outcomes.

2.4. Perceived CEO communication quality

In organizational settings, perceived communication quality has been examined as a critical aspect of communication satisfaction, which refers to the satisfaction of an individual with various aspects of communication in interpersonal, group, and organizational contexts (Mueller & Lee, 2002). Downs and Down (1989) defined perceived communication quality as “whether an interaction was perceived to be of high or low quality, poor or excellent, correct or incorrect, worthless or worthwhile, as well as satisfactory or unsatisfactory” (p. 60). In the context of management communication, numerous studies have explored the generic construct of communication satisfaction as an outcome of corporate internal and supervisory communication (e.g., Mueller & Lee, 2002; White, Vanc, & Stafford, 2010). Multiple factors, such as communication style, message types and uses, communication motive, frequency, channels, and formality, have been suggested to predict perceived communication quality and satisfaction in the organizational context (e.g., Anderson & Martin, 1999; Men, 2014b; White et al., 2010). For instance, the relational message orientation, argumentativeness, and aggressiveness of leaders have been determined to influence communication satisfaction (Anderson & Martin, 1999). White et al. (2010) revealed that more access to the organizational CEO induced trust in administration, as well as spurred the employees' sense of belonging to the community and increased their satisfaction with the amount of information they received. The current study similarly predicts that how the CEO communicates with employees (i.e., CEO communication style) will influence the employee evaluation of CEO communication quality, which is an important indicator of organizational communication satisfaction (Mueller & Lee, 2002). Previous studies have consistently highlighted the positive effects of responsive communication on outcome variables. Thus, the current study predicts that responsive CEO communication, which is characterized by good listening, being responsive, empathetic, compassionate, understanding, friendly, warm, sincere, and interested, will positively influence perceived CEO communication quality by employees. With regard to the effectiveness of an assertive communication style, previous research yields inconclusive results. As the top leader of the organization, the CEO is sometimes expected to appear strong to assert control. Therefore, assertive CEO communication, which is characterized by being dominant, forceful, aggressive, and competitive, may likewise have positive effects on perceived CEO communication quality. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1.** Responsive CEO communication positively influences perceived CEO communication quality.
- H2.** Assertive CEO communication positively influences perceived CEO communication quality.

2.5. Employee–organization relationships

This study focuses on employee–organization relationships as an outcome of CEO internal communication. In public relations, the concept of organization–public relationships has been examined extensively in a variety of contexts, including corporate, non-profit, government, global, and online settings (e.g., Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2003; Hung, 2006; Men and Hung, 2012; Ni & Wang, 2011; Seltzer & Zhang, 2011). As noted by Jo and Shim 2005, in the internal organizational context, “given the emerging paradigm of public relations by relationship management, the terms of internal communication need to be redefined as part of building favorable relationships between management and employees” (p. 278). According to Kim and Rhee (2011) and Men (2014a), an employee–organization relationship can be defined as the degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to the other. This definition includes the relationship outcomes (i.e., trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, and commitment) suggested by Hon and Grunig (1999), which have been discussed extensively in the relationship management literature.

As argued by Haywood (2005), regardless of whether or not they are asked, employees transmit messages regarding company operations to all of the audiences upon whom the company depends. Quality relationships between organizations and their employees not only contribute to organizational performance and the achievement of organizational goals, but also help build and protect organizational reputation and image in a turbulent environment (Kim & Rhee, 2011). According to Kim and Rhee (2011), if employees have experienced positive long-term relationships with their organization, “they

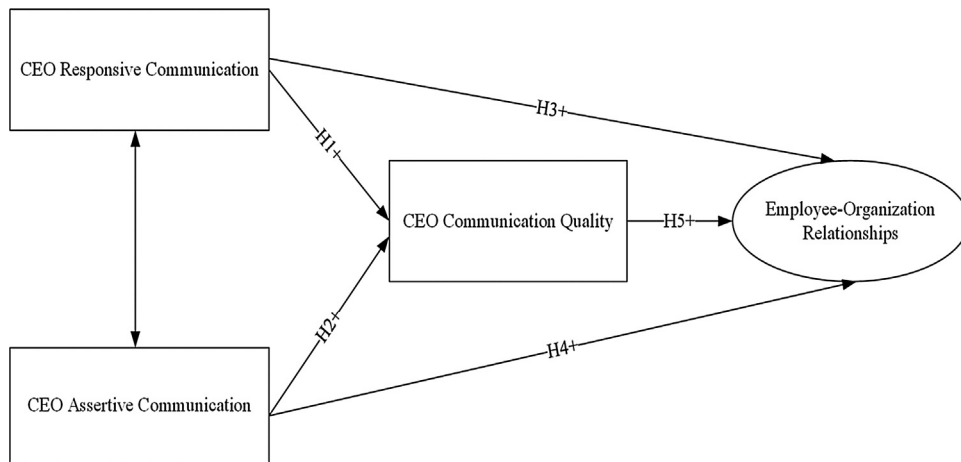


Fig. 1. Proposed model of CEO communication style, CEO communication quality, and employee–organization relationships.

are likely to consider organizational problems as their own, and are thus likely to forward and share supportive information for their organization during the organizational turbulence.” Men (2014a) similarly indicated that the quality of employee–organization relationships positively influences employee advocacy behavior. Employees who trust, are satisfied with and committed to the organization, and agree on mutual influence tend to publicly advocate the company by engaging in positive word-of-mouth, defending the organization, and recommending the company to their personal networks.

Numerous researchers have recognized the importance of employee–organization relationships in achieving organizational success and have examined factors that contribute to positive employee relational outcomes. Leadership style, organizational culture, organizational structure, diversity, internal communication channels, symmetrical internal communication, corporate character, organizational transparency and authenticity, and employee empowerment have all been identified as predictors of quality employee–organization relationships (e.g., Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men, 2011, 2014a; Men and Stacks, 2013, 2014; Park, Kim, & Krishna, 2014; Rawlins, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012). Leadership communication, which has been recognized as a major component of the organization’s communication system (Whitworth, 2011), was demonstrated to influence employee attitudes and behavior (Men and Stacks, 2014; McCown, 2014). The current study similarly posits that CEO communication with employees (i.e., style and quality), as part of the leadership communication efforts of an organization, would affect employee–organization relational outcomes. Specifically, the responsive, compassionate, understanding, and sincere communication of CEOs can nurture quality employee–organization relationships. Assertive, competitive, dominant, and forceful CEO communication may establish the CEO as a strong, confident, and competent leader, therefore boosting the trust of employees toward their leader and the organization, their willingness to be controlled, and possibly their commitment to and satisfaction with the organization. Moreover, this study predicts that employee evaluation of the quality of CEO communication will directly influence the quality of employee–organization relationships.

H3. Responsive CEO communication positively influences the quality of employee–organization relationships.

H4. Assertive CEO communication positively influences the quality of employee–organization relationships.

H5. CEO communication quality positively influences the quality of employee–organization relationships.

3. Method

3.1. Population and sample

A quantitative online survey was conducted to explore the research questions and test the proposed model (see Fig. 1). The study population comprised employees at different positions in medium- and large-sized corporations in the United States.¹ Sample selection aimed to cover a diverse range of business communities to enhance the generalizability of data. Instead of selecting participant corporations, individual employees of various corporations were recruited by a multinational sampling firm from its 1.5 million-member research panel in the United States in April 2014.² Stratified and quota random sampling

¹ Small business companies with less than 250 employees were excluded from the population in the current study because small companies have different organization dynamics from medium and large corporations.

² The companies of the participants covered various industries, including education, retail, health care, finance, information technology, food, industry and manufacturing, consumer electronics, and transportation and logistics.

was used to obtain a representative sample across various age groups and income and education levels. A final sample size of 545 was obtained. The final sample was composed of 59.7% males and 40.3% females, and 43.7% non-management and 56.3% management employees. The average age was 44, and the average corporate tenure was 15 years. Approximately 65% of the respondents held at least a bachelor's degree.

3.2. Measures

Using a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), two focal concepts, namely, CEO communication style and employee–organizational relational outcomes, were measured in this study. The assertiveness–responsiveness measure (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990), which includes eight items related to responsiveness (e.g., “interested,” “sincere,” “warm,” “friendly,” and “compassionate,” $\alpha = 0.94$) and six items related to assertiveness (e.g., “act as a leader,” “dominant,” “forceful,” “aggressive,” “competitive,” and “has a strong personality,” $\alpha = 0.77$), was used to evaluate CEO communication style as perceived by employees. The measure of employee–organization relational outcomes was adapted from the widely used the measure of organization–public relationships developed by Hon and Grunig (1999). This 20-item instrument comprises the following four sub-constructs: employee trust (e.g., “This company can be relied on to keep its promises;” $\alpha = .91$), control mutuality (e.g., “This company and I are attentive to what each other says;” $\alpha = .89$), commitment (e.g., “I would rather work together with this company than not;” $\alpha = .88$), and satisfaction (e.g., “I enjoy dealing with this company;” $\alpha = .96$). Moreover, using a seven-point semantic differential scale, perceived CEO communication quality was measured via four items adopted from Downs and Down (1989) (i.e., high or low quality, poor or excellent, worthless or worthwhile, and satisfactory or unsatisfactory, $\alpha = .88$). In addition to measuring the focal constructs, four questions regarding the communication channels used by CEOs to communicate with employees were included, namely: (1) What channels does your CEO use to communicate with employees? (Check all that apply) (2) What social media channels does your CEO use? (3) Do you follow the CEO of your company on any of the above social media? (4) How strong is the social media presence of your company CEO? (from 1 = very weak to 5 = very strong).

One pretest and one preliminary survey were conducted prior to survey administration to ensure the reliability and validity of the measure. The pretest was conducted on 20 employees who were recruited through convenience sampling from three high-tech companies in Silicon Valley in January 2014. Respondents completed the online survey sent through email and social networking apps and provided feedback on the wording, thematic clarity, and format of the survey. Minor revisions were subsequently made to the survey based on respondent feedback. For instance, two categories, namely, “internet” and “consumer electronics,” were added to the question on industry type. In late February 2014, the final survey questionnaire was sent to 100 randomly selected employees from various organizations through the sampling firm for another round of pretests. Preliminary analysis of the reliability and validity of the measures yielded satisfactory results. Therefore, all of the measurement instruments of key variables remained the same in the formal survey.

Descriptive analysis was used to explore the research questions. The proposed model (Fig. 1) and hypotheses were tested through structural equation modeling (SEM) AMOS 21.0 software. Multiple criteria were used to evaluate the model goodness of fit, including the comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). These indices constitute the minimal set of fit indices that should be reported and interpreted in SEM analyses (Kline, 2005).³

4. Results

4.1. CEO use of communication channels

Respondents reported that their CEOs most commonly use email ($f = 455$, 83.5%) and face-to-face channels, such as employee meetings and management by walking around ($f = 366$, 67.2%), to communicate with employees. These channels were followed by Intranet ($f = 210$, 38.5%), print media, such as newsletters, magazines, memos, posters, and fliers ($f = 171$, 31.4%), teleconferencing ($f = 145$, 26.6%), and streamline video/audio ($f = 107$, 19.6%). Although not as prevalent as other channels, social media platforms, such as blogs and social networking sites, were also reported by some respondents ($f = 60$, 11%). Other channels ($f = 25$, 4.6%) reported by the respondents included telephone, mail, communication in the paycheck, and through their immediate manager/supervisor.

With regard to the use of social media channels by CEOs, the descriptive results of this study indicated that they most frequently use Facebook ($f = 125$, 22.9%), Twitter ($f = 63$, 11.6%), and LinkedIn ($f = 53$, 9.7%), which are followed by YouTube ($f = 33$, 6.1%), blogs ($f = 32$, 5.9%), and Instagram ($f = 27$, 5%). Other tools, such as Google+ (20, 3.7%), Pinterest ($f = 17$, 3.1%), and Flickr ($f = 1$, 1.3%), were reported to be less commonly used by CEOs. Other social media tools used by CEOs ($f = 30$, 5.5%) reported by respondents include Yammer, a work-specific open forum, and Pebble. Roughly 25% of the respondents followed

³ Hu and Bentler (1999) suggested that a cutoff value close to 0.95 for CFI and the TLI, a cutoff value close to 0.08 for SRMR, and a cutoff value close to 0.06 for RMSEA indicate good fit between the hypothesized model and the observed data. Kline (2005) observed that a single fit index reflects only a particular aspect of model fit and that a favorable value of this index does not, in itself, indicate good fit. No single index provides a gold standard for all of the models. The chi-square is the most commonly reported measure of model-data fit. However, the chi-square is highly dependent on sample size.

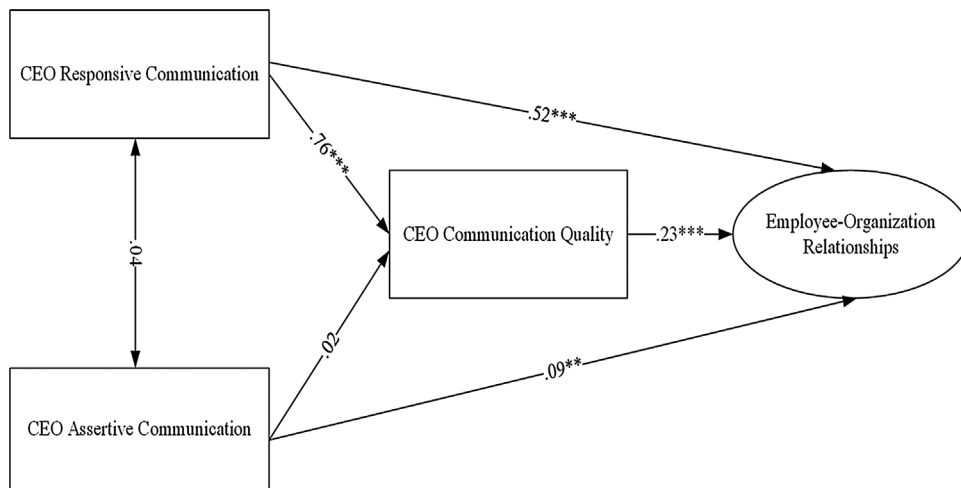


Fig. 2. Results of the hypothesized model. Coefficients are standardized regression weights. For the sake of brevity, only the path model is demonstrated. The CFA model pattern coefficients, error terms of indicators, and disturbances of endogenous variables were omitted from the figure. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$.

their CEO on at least one of the social media platforms. On average, respondents reported that their CEOs have a mediocre level of social media presence ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 1.20$, 1 = “very weak presence,” 5 = “very strong presence”). Moreover, CEO social media presence exhibited significant strong positive zero-order correlations with CEO responsive communication ($r = .33$, $p < .01$), perceived communication quality ($r = .26$, $p < .01$), and employee–organization relationships ($r = .25$, $p < .01$).

4.2. Analysis of structural equation modeling

The proposed model was analyzed and interpreted in the following two stages: (a) an assessment of the construct validity of the measurement model through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and (b) an assessment of the structural model. In the structural model, the unidimensional variables of responsiveness, assertiveness, and CEO communication quality were specified as observed variables, and the multi-dimensional variable of employee–organization relationships was specified as a latent variable with four indicators (i.e., trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction). The test of the measurement model indicated satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2(11) = 31.39$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.85$, $RMSEA = .05$ (90% confidence interval: .03–.08), $SRMR = .02$, $TLI = .98$, and $CFI = .99$. The standardized factor loadings between latent variables and their indicators ranged from .80 to .96, which suggest that the proposed measurement model has good construct validity.

The multivariate normality assumption of SEM was evaluated in AMOS prior to the estimation of the hypothesized model. Results indicated that the sample data exhibited a significant positive multivariate kurtosis. Therefore, bootstrapping ($N = 2000$ samples) using maximum likelihood method was performed to test the multivariate non-normality of the data. The bootstrap parameter estimations did not deviate from those based on normal theory, which indicates that the significant results in Fig. 2 remained significant in the bootstrapping process, and that the nonsignificant results remained nonsignificant. The hypothesized structural model illustrated in Fig. 2 demonstrates satisfactory fit to the data: $\chi^2(11) = 31.39$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.85$, $RMSEA = .05$ (.03–.08), $SRMR = .02$, $TLI = .98$, and $CFI = .99$. Four structural paths demonstrated significant results at $p < .001$ or $p < .01$ level.

4.3. Hypotheses testing

The study proposed five hypotheses, four of which were fully supported by the data and one was rejected. The results of each hypothesis testing are presented as follows.

Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted positive associations between responsive and assertive CEO communication and the quality of CEO communication. As depicted in Fig. 2, hypothesis 1 was supported, whereas hypothesis 2 was rejected. Responsive CEO communication demonstrates a significant strong positive effect on the quality of CEO communication ($\beta = .76$, $p < .001$). Contrary to the expectation, assertive CEO communication demonstrated a nonsignificant effect on CEO communication quality ($\beta = .02$, $p > .05$).

Hypotheses 3 and 4 proposed that responsive and assertive CEO communication each positively affects the quality of employee–organization relationships. The results supported both hypotheses. As expected, responsive CEO communication demonstrates a strong positive effect on the quality of employee–organization relationships ($\beta = .52$, $p < .001$). Assertive CEO communication similarly demonstrates a small but significant positive effect on the quality of employee–organization relationships ($\beta = .09$, $p < .001$).

Hypothesis 5 predicted the positive direct effects of the quality of CEO communication on employee relational outcomes. The results supported this hypothesis. CEO communication quality demonstrated a significant strong positive effect on the quality of employee–organization relationships ($\beta = .23, p < .001$).

5. Discussion

This study primarily investigated the role of CEOs in organizational internal communication by examining the channels that CEOs use to communicate with employees, their communication styles, as well as the effects of such styles on perceived CEO communication quality and employee relational outcomes. The results provided important implications for public relations scholars and professionals.

5.1. CEO internal communication channels

Pincus et al. (1991) revealed that CEOs communicate most frequently with employees through interpersonal channels, such as “management by walking around” and one-on-one meetings, followed by articles in internal publications, group meetings, speeches, memos, and phone calls, in that order. The internal communication landscape of organizations has evolved over the past decades (Crescenzo, 2011). As revealed in the present study, although traditional face-to-face channels (i.e., employee meetings) and print media (i.e., newsletters and magazines) are still commonly used by CEOs in internal communication, other electronic platforms (i.e., email, intranet, teleconference, streamline video/audio) and social media tools (i.e., blogs and social networking sites) have emerged and become increasingly popular among CEOs.

Social media platforms have become an indispensable component of the communication landscape of organizations (Kelleher, 2009; Men and Tsai, 2013; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), prompting a growing number of CEOs to embrace the trend and build their social media presence. The study results showed that although more and more CEOs have started to use social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and blogs to manage their online presence, only a small number have used such tools to communicate with employees. Nevertheless, although CEOs generally showed a moderate level of social media presence, CEO social media presence was found to be strongly and positively related to employee perception of CEO communication and employee relational outcomes. Specifically, results of this study implied that CEOs who maintain a stronger social media presence are more likely to be perceived as responsive communicators who are sincere, friendly, agreeable, compassionate, understanding, and willing to listen. CEO social media presence was also determined to be positively associated with perceived CEO communication quality and favorable employee relational outcomes with the organization, such as trust, mutual control, commitment, and satisfaction. These findings can be explained by the fact that social media communication, which is relational, interactive, communal, and personal, mimics traditional face-to-face interpersonal communication, which was found to be effective in CEO communication with employees (Men, 2014b; Pincus et al., 1991; Sheer, 2011). Moreover, the empowering nature of social media fosters equal dialogues between the CEO and employees, shortens power distance, facilitates employee upward communication, and promotes two-way information flow and communication symmetry in the organization (Men, 2014b). Thus, employees feel more connected to the top management, empowered, and engaged by the organization, and would develop better relationship with the organization.

5.2. CEO communication style and effectiveness

With regard to the communication style of CEOs, results of this study indicated that responsive CEO communication, which is characterized by a warm, friendly, sincere, understanding, compassionate, listening, and interested communication style, positively influences perceived CEO communication quality. In other words, responsive CEOs are more likely to be perceived as effective communicators. However, assertive CEO communication, which is characterized by an aggressive, competitive, dominant, and forceful style (Porter et al., 2007), exhibited a nonsignificant effect on perceived CEO communication quality. This result may be attributed to the fact that CEOs, as the top leaders in their organizations, are expected to speak up to demand, and to be strong, assertive, and dominant in their communication. Such assertive communication focuses on the task dimension of relationships (Richmond, 2002), and therefore does not necessarily affect the quality of communication directly.

Moreover, as expected, both responsive and assertive CEO communication styles positively influence the quality of employee–organization relationships. Responsive CEO communication demonstrates a stronger positive effect on employee relational outcomes than assertive CEO communication. Responsive CEOs are sensitive to the needs of employees, are willing to listen to what employees have to say, and recognize the voice and benefits of employees (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996; Richmond, 2002). Such CEOs focus on the relational dimension of relationships and embrace a symmetrical communication mindset. Given the natural linkage between the CEO and the organization, employees who are managed by responsive CEOs will feel cared for, trusted, empowered, and involved in the organization, which consequently induces positive employee relational outcomes. This finding concurs with the argument made by previous scholars that responsive communication is positively associated with transparency and openness, which are critical conditions for nurturing quality relationships (Men and Stacks, 2013; Rawlins, 2009; Teven et al., 2006). Moreover, assertive CEO communication demonstrates a small positive effect on the quality of employee–organization relationships. Assertive CEOs who are aggressive, forceful, dominant, and

focused on task aspects in their communication may be trusted by their employees as confident and strong leaders, which boosts employee trust and commitment to the organization.

Finally, perceived CEO communication quality strongly influences employee relational outcomes with the organization. Employees who work for CEOs who are better communicators tend to trust the company more, are more empowered, committed to, and satisfied with the organization. This finding concurs with previous findings that communication satisfaction is positively associated with leader–member exchange and employee attitudinal outcomes (Mueller & Lee, 2002).

6. Conclusion

The findings of the current study provide important implications for public relations scholars and professionals. First, theoretically, by demonstrating the effects of CEO communication on the quality of employee–organization relationships, this study adds to the growing body of literature on leadership communication and proves the notion of previous scholars (Grunig et al., 2002; Men, 2014b; Men and Stacks, 2014) that strategic leadership and management behavior should be considered as the characteristics of excellent public relations. Second, with a particular emphasis on the role of CEOs in internal communication, the present study implies that different levels of organizational leadership (i.e., CEO/top management, middle-management, and frontline managers) may influence internal communication practices and effectiveness in various degrees. Thus, future theorists should segment leaders based on such levels to examine their specific communication roles. Third, the study examined CEOs' use of communication channels in the social media era and demonstrated the associations between CEO social media presence and perceived CEO communication quality, responsiveness as well as employee–organization relationship outcomes. Moreover, this study extends the literature on relationship management by suggesting CEO communication style and quality as antecedents of employee–organization relationship management. Centered on CEO communication, the findings provide new empirical evidence for the effectiveness of the interpersonal approach of organization–public relationship management (Toth, 2000).

Pragmatically, the findings of the current study provide important implications for public relations professionals and top management on how to enact the role of CEOs as chief engagement officer to cultivate quality employee–organization relationships. In general, CEOs should communicate in a responsive, warm, friendly, empathetic, sincere, caring, and interested manner to demonstrate their concern for their employees, openness, and willingness to listen, although CEOs may be expected to communicate in an assertive, forceful, and dominant manner in certain circumstances. Thus, in addition to necessary CEO communication training on what (i.e., the content), how (i.e., the channels), and when (i.e., the timing) to communicate with employees, public relations professionals must educate CEOs about their vital roles in internal organizational communication. They should likewise equip CEOs with a wide array of communication tools, ranging from traditional tools, such as face-to-face channels, print publications, email, and phones, to new technological tools, such as blogs, intranet, social networking sites, instant messaging systems, and video-/teleconferences (Men, 2014b). Public relations professionals should also encourage CEOs to be open-minded, embrace changes, build a prominent and visible social media presence, and personally interact with their employees through social media to proactively listen. Such top management involvement will set an open, transparent, and engaging tone for internal communication and facilitate the development of a symmetrical internal communication system, which eventually contributes to organizational effectiveness (Grunig et al., 2002).

The current study has several limitations that should be noted and addressed in future research. First, the data were collected only from the perspective of employees, which may be subject to common source measurement error. Also, respondents recruited from the online survey panel may not fully represent the general population in the United States. Additionally, this study particularly focused on CEO communication style, quality, and use of communication channels; other important issues, such as communication content and the effectiveness of each specific communication channel, were beyond the scope of this study. Future researchers could further investigate the issue by incorporating the perspectives of top management and CEOs. Replication studies can be conducted to cross-validate the results obtained from this study using different samples from various organizational or cultural settings. Future studies on CEO internal communication could also address the various communication and information needs from CEOs by employees at different levels and explore other factors (e.g., CEO personality, leadership style, and communication strategies) that could possibly affect perceived CEO communication quality.

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