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# Public engagement with CEOs on social media: Motivations and relational outcomes

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### ABSTRACT

This study provides one of the earliest empirical analyses to explore how and why publics engage with corporate CEOs on social media and why such engagement matters. It tested a conceptual model linking CEO–public engagement to the interpersonal communicative variables of perceived authenticity and approachability as well as organization–public relational outcomes. Through a web survey of 332 social media users, results showed that publics are primarily motivated by reasons of thought leadership and task attraction when they engage with CEOs on SNSs. CEO–public engagement showed significant positive effects on perceived CEO authenticity and approachability, which in turn, positively influenced public trust and satisfaction. Public engagement with CEOs on social media also directly influenced the quality of organization–public relationships.

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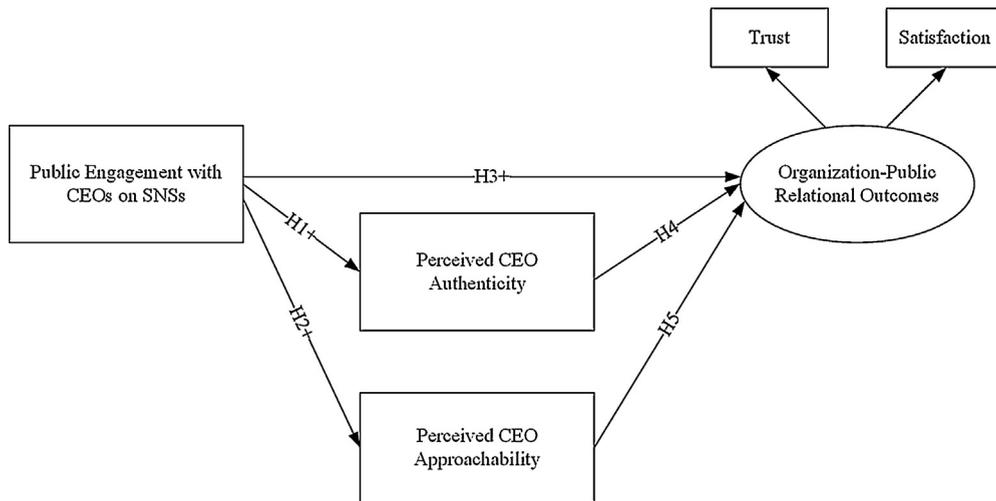
## 1. Introduction

Powered by the digital technologies for interactivity, connectivity and collaboration, social media has spearheaded the recent paradigm shift from public relations to public engagement (Taylor & Kent, 2014). As social media usage increases, so too does the potential for organizations to connect with stakeholders not conventionally accessible through traditional communication channels. With the direct, spontaneous, interactive, and relationship-centric features, social media has been advocated as a unique “social milieu that enables interpersonal communication” (Zhong, Hardin, & Sun, 2011, p. 1266), providing unprecedented opportunities for organizations to engage stakeholders in more personal and meaningful ways. Not surprisingly, an increasing number of organizations around the world have embraced social media to personify themselves and engage today’s digital-savvy publics (Men & Tsai, 2012).

The importance of interpersonal approaches to communication in building and enhancing organization–public relationships (OPRs) has been well documented in the public relations literature (e.g., Toth 2000). While the interpersonal approach is often studied in offline, face-to-face interactions (e.g., Hendriks, van den Putte, de Bruijn, & de Vreese, 2014; Zillich, 2014), recent research has stressed the importance of adopting this approach for organizational social media communications (Sung & Kim, 2014). Blurring the boundary between mass and personal media, social platforms provide an ideal environment for organizations to engage publics in a personal, intimate way. Interpersonal communication in online environments was found to positively impact organization evaluations (Kelleher, 2009). As an interpersonal communication tactic, an engaging corporate character on corporate SNS pages also enhances favorable organizational reputation and meaningful relationships

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**Fig. 1.** Proposed model of public engagement with CEOs on SNSs, perceived CEO authenticity and approachability, and organizational-public relational outcomes.

with stakeholders (Men & Tsai, 2014; Verčič & Verčič, 2007). Additionally, Sung and Kim's (2014) experiment revealed that organizations' interpersonal approaches to communication characterized by non-commercial, non-promotional messages and high degrees of interactivity leads to more favorable evaluations. As organizations strive to build and maintain relationship with stakeholders, it is important to develop theoretical frameworks for illuminating the dynamics influencing the effectiveness of interpersonal approach in social communication and relationship management. From the perspective of leadership branding, this study aims to advance the emerging literature on social media engagement by providing original insights on how the interpersonal approach of public relations may function in the social media environment. We focus on publics' engagement with corporate leaders, specifically chief executive officers (CEOs), on CEOs' personal pages on social networking sites (SNSs).

Recognizing the potential of social media to humanize organizations and cultivate meaningful relationships (Vidgen, Sims, & Powell, 2013), an increasing number of CEOs are embracing social media to change their images from distant and intimidating to personable and approachable, including such high-profile corporate executives as Burberry's Angela Ahrendts and Virgin Group's Richard Branson. Industry reports suggested that more than 80% of executives surveyed believe social media is an important gateway for CEOs to deepen connections with customers, employees, and investors (Brandfog, 2013), proclaiming that "social CEOs" who can engage their stakeholders in genuine conversations will become the new wave of corporate leaders (Weber Shandwick, 2012). Many CEOs themselves also believe their social media presence and engagement demonstrate innovativeness and improve their companies' reputation (Weber Shandwick, 2012). However, despite the hypes and speculations in trade publications, there is little empirical evidence regarding why and how CEOs' engagement with publics on social media is crucial for organizations.

It has been widely acknowledged that CEOs play a critical organizational role. Specifically for the purpose of public relations, CEOs serve as public figures for their organizations to communicate a vision. Fanelli and Misangyi (2006) argued that successful CEOs create a positive image that not only enhances identification among the firm's members but also increases external stakeholders' identification with the organization and creates a favorable reputation for the firm, forging positive relations with various stakeholders.

Especially in the Web 2.0 era, the role of CEOs has evolved to become more visible, social, connected, and accessible than ever before (Brandfog, 2013). Publics have come to expect greater access to the insights and vision of corporate leaders in more open dialogues. In other words, CEOs are pivotal in companies' social media communications. Specifically, as social CEOs could be perceived as more approachable and authentic, their personal SNS pages can serve as a more personal platform that helps their organizations to get closer to their online stakeholders. CEO sociability, tentatively defined as CEOs' social media presence and engagement activities in the current study, thus may work to personify and humanize monolithic corporations to stakeholders and engage publics in a more personal level that cultivates quality relationships (Vidgen et al., 2013).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to verify the proposition that a CEO's personal SNS page can be an effective medium for leveraging the interpersonal approach to enhance high quality relationships between online stakeholders and the organizations that the CEO represents. Specifically, it tests a conceptual model that links CEO-public engagement on SNSs, interpersonal communicative variables of CEO approachability and authenticity, and public relations outcome of OPRs. Additionally, to understand the phenomenon of social CEOs, the study draws upon uses and gratification theory and previous literature on public-organization social media engagement to analyze publics' motivations to follow and interact with CEOs on SNSs.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Social media and public engagement

With the growth of the relationship management field in public relations, public engagement has been proposed as a new paradigm as organizations endeavor to integrate, interact, and collaborate with their stakeholders (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Defined as “the interaction between an organization and those individuals and groups that are impacted by, or influence, the organization” (Bruce & Shelley, 2010, p. 30), scholars have studied public engagement in various settings and from different perspectives. For instance, Kang conceptualized public engagement as a “behavioral motivator” (2014, p. 399) leading to supportive behaviors toward an organization. Jaaskon (2010) analyzed stakeholder engagement in the process of formulating organizational values statements and proposed three levels of engagement—information, consultation, and partnership. Cho, Schweickart, and Haase (2014) similarly assessed three different levels of public engagement—liking, sharing, and commenting—with nonprofit organizations’ messages on Facebook.

Recognizing the potential of social media for relationship management, recent studies have focused on public engagement with organizations on social media platforms. Kang (2014) argued that the success of organizations in today’s new media landscape heavily relies on effective public engagement strategies for meaningful partnerships. Research shows that the organizational message strategies of two-way symmetrical communication tend to induce high levels of public engagement, compared to two-way asymmetrical strategies (Cho et al., 2014). Comparing public engagement of social media campaign across Facebook, Twitter, and blogs, Paek, Hove, Jung, and Cole (2013) reported that individuals’ use of each social media platform is significantly related to their engagement with the campaign, which in turn mediates the relationship between their social media use and their offline communication behavior. In addition, antecedents of public engagement with organizations on corporate SNS pages, including social media dependency, parasocial interaction, and community identification, have been identified (Tsai & Men, 2013). The outcomes of such engagement including organizational transparency, OPR, public advocacy, and loyalty have also been verified (Kang, 2014; Men & Tsai, 2014).

This study adapts Men and Tsai’s (2013) conceptualization of public engagement to explore public engagement with CEOs’ personal SNS pages. Based on Muntinga, Moorman, and Smith’s (2011) typology of consumers’ brand-related activities on online media, Men and Tsai (2013) define public engagement as a hierarchical behavioral construct with varied activity levels, from passive message consumption (e.g., viewing social media posts) to active content contributing which includes two-way conversation and online recommendations (e.g., commenting and replying to others’ SNS posts, sharing and contributing user-generated content such as product reviews) (Men & Tsai, 2013; Tsai & Men, 2013).

### 2.2. CEOs as chief engagement officers

Regarding the study focus of CEO sociability and the associated consequences for public relations, scholars argue that corporate strategy and performance is a function of executive characteristics (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). In corporate communications, CEOs often become the face of their organization, such that CEOs may “literally and symbolically be the organization to stakeholders” (Park & Berger, 2004; p. 93). Stepping up from the conventional role of corporate spokesperson, many CEOs are now actively involved in organizational social communication strategies (Holtz, 2014), taking on the new role of “chief engagement officer” (Edelman, 2014).

In their content analysis of news portrayals of CEOs, Park and Berger (2004) pointed out that there has been a growing emphasis on the personal dimensions of CEO image in American newspapers since the 1980s. The personal approach is further amplified by the spontaneous, interactive, and communal technologies of social media that can bring CEOs closer to stakeholders. In the process, social media blur the boundaries of personal and professional, private and public (Jameson, 2014). Recent engagement studies focusing on social media communications that resemble interpersonal conversations in dialogic, human voice similarly echoed the personal emphasis of social engagement (Kelleher, 2009; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007).

Along with the media evolution of CEO images toward more visibility, sociability, and approachability, publics have also taken advantage of the more direct and open interactions with corporate leaders on social media. For instance, when Chiquita Brands considered relocating its corporate headquarters, stakeholders in competing cities directly communicated with the CEO via Twitter to be part of the decision-making process (Jameson, 2014). Since interactivity between parties is an essence of interpersonal communication (Heeter, 1989; Kiousis, 2002; Sethi & Seth, 2009), the highly interactive and dialogical features and social context of SNSs makes it an ideal platform for humanizing CEOs and engaging stakeholders in interpersonal communication. Publics’ expectation of CEOs to attend and respond to their accounts is central in their interactions. The anticipated accountability is likely to lead to a more ongoing, substantive relationship, rather than an impromptu act of “liking.”

In sharp contrast to the excitements and speculations about social CEOs in trade publications, empirical research exploring CEO sociability is seriously lacking. Prior studies exploring interactions between public figures and netizens on social media have focused on parasocial interactions (e.g., Stever & Lawson, 2013), particularly those between entertainment media celebrities and their fans. Research shows that such interactions on social media are serious, meaningful, and impactful for those participating (Stever & Lawson, 2013). Some other studies have analyzed politician bloggers. Coleman and Moss (2008) argued that through social media, political communicators can create feelings of closeness with citizens to break down a

sense of distance and strangeness. Specific to CEOs-public engagement on social media, Vidgen et al.'s (2013) content analysis of CEO blogs indicated that the ability of CEOs to engage commentators on blogs is essential to achieve community building and genuine dialogues.

### 2.3. Motivations of CEO-public engagement on social media

To explore the phenomenon of CEO social media engagement, it is important to first understand why publics follow, like, or interact with CEOs on their SNS pages. Based on uses and gratification theory, previous research has suggested key motivators for public engagement with organizations on SNSs, including remuneration, entertainment, information, social integration, personal identity, and empowerment (Boyd, 2008; Tsai & Men 2013). To be specific, remuneration refers to seeking rewards and economic incentives, such as coupons and promotions, which are constantly distributed and shared through online social networks. Entertainment refers to the relaxation, enjoyment, and emotional relief generated by temporarily escaping from mundane routines (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Information pertains to information seeking, which includes the search for advice, opinions, and information exchange (Park et al., 2009). Social integration addresses the need to belong and involves supportive peer groups and interpersonal connections (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008). Personal identity is concerned with an individual's self-identity, which involves self-expression, identity management, and self-achievement (Men & Tsai, 2012). Empowerment is the use of social media to exert influence and enforce excellence (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2003).

Although these recent studies have identified motivations of using SNSs in general (e.g., Boyd, 2008), and of following and liking corporate SNS pages specifically (e.g., Men & Tsai, 2012; Tsai & Men, 2013), research to date has not investigated why publics follow CEOs on social media. Research on mediated interactions suggests fans' key motivations to maintain parasocial relationships with media celebrities include task attraction (i.e., the celebrity's expertise) and identification/social attraction (i.e., the celebrity as a role model) (Stever, 2013). Indeed, many CEOs of renowned companies now enjoy a celebrity status and CEOs are often viewed to be the representatives of the organizations. However, motivators of public social media engagement identified in previous literature may or may not be applicable to CEO-public social media engagement. As engagement has been linked to various key public relations outcomes (Men & Tsai, 2014), understanding publics' motivations to engage with CEOs on SNSs is crucial when formulating strategies to induce social engagement. The research question regarding why publics engage with CEOs' personal SNS pages thus is explored herein:

RQ1: Why do publics engage with corporate CEOs on their SNS pages?

### 2.4. CEO authenticity and approachability

Different types of CEO personality traits have been linked to dissimilar leadership styles and effects (Resick, Whitman, Weingarden, & Hiller, 2009). Yet, few studies have explored how publics' perceptions of CEO sociability influence what strategic outcomes. As communications between CEOs and publics on SNSs are contextualized in the communal space of collaborative interactions, interpersonal communication factors of CEO approachability and authenticity are instructive to understand the effects of CEO-public SNS engagement.

Defined as "making a sincere effort to make known all relevant information and [...] true intentions, interests, needs, and desires" (Dahlberg, 2001), scholars argue authenticity constitutes the foundation of effective online communication in public discourses, including corporate executives' personal SNS pages. Online interactions must be perceived as sincere and authentic before meaningful relationships between institutions and publics can be established (Slater, 2002). In "an era where people want authentic stories about authentic people" (Cook, 2007, p. 33), this factor is particularly relevant to understand the impacts of CEO sociability and mediated relationships. Specifically, public figures often need to communicate rational decisions without appearing insensitive or far removed from the publics (Gilpin, Palazzolo, & Brody, 2010). Given the hyper-personal nature of social media (Vidgen et al., 2013), when organizations and their leaders interact with stakeholders, the question of authenticity becomes a critical concern. Scholars thus argue authenticity is one of the key challenges of digitally mediated communication and virtual relationships (Slater, 2002).

In the organizational context, corporate authenticity refers to being truthful to an organization itself and its publics (Henderson & Brookhart, 1996). Shen and Kim (2012) identified three components of authentic organizational behavior—truthfulness, transparency, and consistency. In this regard, CEOs' posts and responses are often open dialogues that are readily verifiable, contributing to trust that is a fundamental element in authenticity. In addition, in their study of online communication of public affairs by government agencies, Gilpin et al., 2010 suggested that authority as expressed by the level of knowledge and expertise regarding the institution its operating domain is a deciding factor of authenticity. Without authority, corporate or institutional social media platforms cannot be viewed as authentically representative of the organization. They thus argue that institutional agencies have to communicate public affairs with authority to develop authentic relationships based on trust. In other words, the authority and expertise of CEOs may engender authenticity, especially regarding their public posts on the corporation, products, policies and activities.

Moreover, Gilpin et al.'s (2010) study on public institutions' online communications identified engagement as an influential factor driving socially mediated authenticity. Institutions' willingness to engage directly with publics and to encourage stakeholders to freely interact with each other was found to enhance authenticity. By the same token, CEOs' active engagement with stakeholders may enhance CEOs' social authenticity. Notably, publics' engagement with CEOs' SNS pages entails

participatory interactions with not only the CEOs but also with fellow users through collaborative activities of cross-posting, liking, and sharing. Such engagement leads to community building that further boosts information sharing and exchange, and in the process, increases the perceived authenticity of the communicative environment, and thus of the CEO (Vidgen et al., 2013). Overall, the limited studies on social authenticity have only focused on the socially mediated communication efforts of political figures or professional sport teams (Gilpin et al., 2010; Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Communication research has yet to explore the construct from the perspective of corporate executives. Accordingly, we propose that CEO-public engagement on SNSs positively contributes to perceived CEO authenticity (see Fig. 1).

H1: Public engagement with corporate CEOs on their SNS pages positively influences perceived CEO authenticity.

Another key concept widely recognized in the interpersonal communication literature is approachability, which is often studied in relation to sociability. Defined as a perception of that a source is warm, caring, and easy to talk to (Porter, Wrench, & Hoskinson, 2007), approachability has been identified as a key factor to achieve successful leadership outcome (Ryan, 2004). Coleman and Moss' (2008) qualitative content analysis of politician-bloggers suggest that the interpersonal approach to blogging, characterized by experientially-based and subjective personal accounts, serves to construct a sense of sincerity and to stage a more personal relationship with online readers. Similarly, the personal tone of messages on CEOs' SNSs may allow publics to imagine themselves being addressed by a close and trusted friend rather than a distant public figure. In the organizational setting, the relevant concept of accessibility also has been directly linked to communication satisfaction (e.g., Falcione 1974). Organizational norms that emphasize supervisor accessibility encourage employees to see their superiors 'as people rather than roles' (Dallinger, 1987, p.32). Along the same line of reasoning, publics who perceive CEOs as accessible through open and frequent communications and interactions on SNSs may consider their relationship in a more interpersonal way.

Industry reports point out that social CEOs are more likely to be seen as good listeners who are friendly, spontaneous, personal, and less distant and scripted than unsocial CEOs (Weber Shandwick, 2012). Because approachability involves the tendency to exhibit caring and goodwill (Porter et al., 2007), when publics become more actively involved in CEOs' personal SNS pages by reading a CEO's personal-referenced posts, observing how the CEO attends to and interacts with fellow followers, and directly communicating with the CEO they follow, the more likely they may perceive the CEO as caring for and valuing their opinions and experiences, and in turn identifying the CEO as highly approachable.

H2: Public engagement with corporate CEOs on their SNS pages positively influences perceived CEO approachability.

## 2.5. CEO sociability and organization-public relationships

Relational exchanges are the foundation for SNSs (Pronschinske et al., 2012). This study thus focuses on OPRs to study the effects of CEO-public social engagement. Defined as "the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics" (Broom, Casey, and Richey, 2000, p. 18), OPR has been analyzed in prior studies as a positive outcome of public engagement on social media. For instance, publics' involvement and engagement with nonprofit organizations on Twitter strengthens their relationship with the organizations (Smitko, 2012). Based on marketing practitioners' perspective on consumer engagement, Sashi (2012) argued that consumer engagement via social media is an effective tool to build enduring relational exchanges with strong emotional bonds. More importantly, individual stakeholders who are more deeply engaged with corporate SNS pages tend to be more trusting of, more satisfied with, and more committed to the organization they follow (Men & Tsai, 2013, 2014). By the same token, publics' active engagement with a CEO's SNS pages can be an influential factor in cultivating and strengthening their relationship with the CEO and the company he or she leads. A hypothesis is provided herein to empirically test the effect of CEO-public social engagement on OPR.

H3: Public engagement with corporate CEOs on their SNS pages positively influences organization-public relational outcomes.

To understand the effects of CEO sociability, this study further tests the link between OPR and the interpersonal communicative factors of authenticity and approachability. In their study on professional sport teams' strategies of using Facebook to attract fans, Pronschinske et al. (2012) argued that SNS communications that signal authenticity have the greatest impact on attracting and maintaining an active, strong fan base. From an internal perspective, Shen and Kim (2012) found that perceived authenticity of the organization nurtures positive employee-organization relationships. Additionally, in their study of OPR with political parties, Seltzer and Zhang (2011) reported interpersonal trust and interpersonal communication are significant predictors of OPR strength.

With regard to approachability, in the relationship-oriented social media environment, approachability may play a critical role for CEOs to initiate and maintain meaningful relationships with stakeholders. Prior studies have examined approachability in a variety of offline interpersonal relationship settings that involve innate power differences, such as teacher-student and subordinate-supervisor relationships (Porter et al., 2007) and the findings consistently suggest that approachability is a requirement of a high-quality relationship (Reid & Johnston, 1999). Distinct from the uneven power distribution setting explored in prior studies, the user-centric nature of social media empowers publics as gatekeepers and content-creators and CEOs as listeners, and in turn, may encourage the establishment of a more equal and substantive relationship with CEOs than before. From the perspective of stakeholders, CEOs often represent the organizations when they communicate with the publics on social media. When the CEOs are perceived as being authentic and approachable, the publics may develop a favorable perception of the organization the CEOs represents under the halo effect, which in turn can lead to positive

relational outcomes. However, there exists no empirical data to address the connections between social authenticity and approachability and OPRs. The following hypotheses thus are formulated to shed the critical theoretical insight:

H4: Perceived CEO authenticity positively influences the organization–public relational outcomes.

H5: Perceived CEO approachability positively influences organization–public relational outcomes.

### 3. Methodology

To answer the research question and empirically test the conceptual model on CEO sociability and public engagement, we conducted a web-based survey using random sample drawn from online survey panels in July 2014. The population of the study was comprised of the adult users of SNSs in the United States. Because the research purpose was to understand how publics engage with CEOs on SNSs, only SNS users who had followed or liked at least one CEO of a company on SNSs (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc.) was eligible to participate in this study. The final sample included 332 SNS users from diverse demographic backgrounds who voluntarily participated in online studies for various rewards compensated by an international research firm. The average age of the respondents surveyed was 36 years. Among the respondents, 59% were women and 41% were men, and 74% percent of the respondents had received some college education and above. In terms of SNS usage, approximately 86% of the respondents had used SNSs for more than three years. Around half of the respondents (47%) spent 1–2 h per day on SNSs and 30% respondents spent at least 3 h per day on SNSs. Around 61% respondents followed 1–2 CEOs on SNSs, 30% followed 3–4, and 10% of the respondents followed over 5 CEOs on SNSs.

During the two-week survey period, randomly selected respondents were directed to Quartrics, an online survey platform, to complete the questionnaire. Before answering any questions, respondents were first instructed to identify a CEO's SNS page they had recently visited (e.g., browse, comment, or post). They then answered questions regarding their engagement activities on the CEO's SNS page, their motivations of such engagement, and perceptions of the CEO and the company.

#### 3.1. Measures

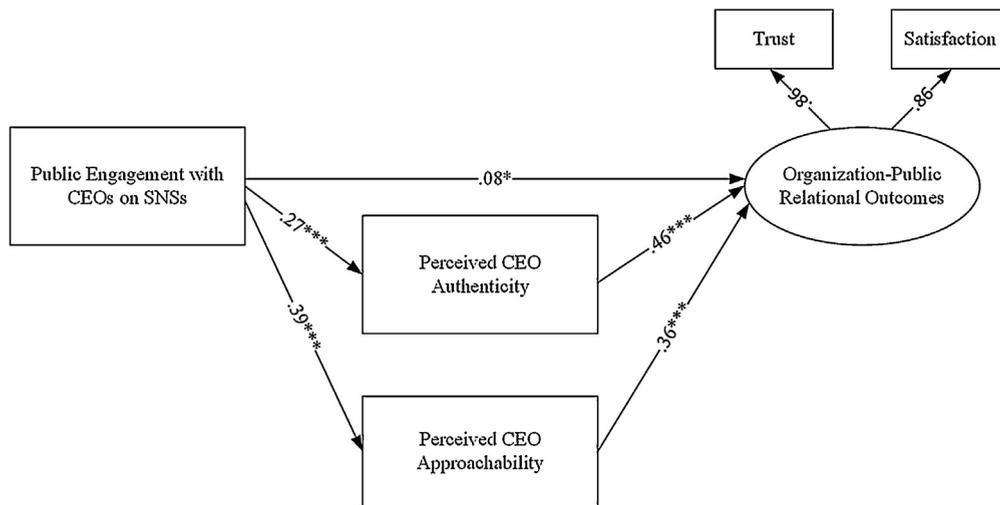
All measurement items used in this study were adopted from prior studies and adapted to fit the CEO SNS context. A seven-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” was used to measure the focal constructs in this study. Specifically, the measure of public engagement with corporate CEOs on their SNS pages included six items adapted from Tsai and Men's (2012) social engagement study. Specifically, the respondents were asked how often they participated in the various activities on the CEO's SNS page, such as “reading the CEO's posts” “reading the CEO's other fan's/followers' comments,” “engaging in conversations with the CEO and other fans” ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ). Seven items regarding respondents' motivations to follow or like the CEO, including “I've followed or liked the CEO of this company on SNSs because he or she is a leader in this industry;” “. . .because I want to gather information about the company's strategies/directions/future initiatives or plans”, were adapted from Stever's (2013) study on fans' motivations to maintain parasocial relationships with media celebrities and Tsai and Men's (2012) study on organization–public engagement on SNSs. Ten items adapted from Shen and Kim (2012) and Men and Tsai (2014) were used to assess perceived CEO authenticity (e.g., “I believe that the CEO's posts on his/her SNS pages are genuine;” “I think the CEO matches what he/she says with action,”  $\alpha = 0.95$ ). Additionally, to measure perceived CEO approachability, 10 items were adopted from Porter et al.'s (2007) study on subordinate's perceptions of supervisor approachability in the organizational setting, and adapted for the research focus of CEO approachability (e.g., “The CEO's communication on his/her SNS page indicates that he/she is open-minded,” “. . .he/she is personal,” “. . .he/she is accessible,”  $\alpha = 0.96$ ). Finally, Hon and Grunig's (1999) scale was adopted to measure relational trust ( $\alpha = 0.92$ ; “I feel very confident about this company's skills”) and satisfaction ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ; “I am happy with this company.”), the two relational outcomes most relevant to the focal concepts of this study. Before administering the questionnaire to the participants, an online pretest was conducted with 80 randomly selected respondents from an online panel maintained by the same research firm. Preliminary analysis of the reliability and validity of the measures demonstrated satisfactory results.

For data analysis, descriptive analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted. Multiple criteria were used to evaluate the goodness-of-model fit, including the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) indices, which are a minimal set of fit indexes that should be reported and interpreted when reporting the results of SEM analyses (Kline, 2005).

### 4. Results

#### 4.1. Preliminary analysis

Preliminary analysis of the data showed that respondents were most likely to follow CEOs on Facebook ( $n = 232$ , 69.9%), followed by Twitter ( $n = 63$ , 19.%) and LinkedIn ( $n = 24$ , 7.2%). Other SNS platforms reported for following CEOs included YouTube ( $n = 4$ , 1.2%), Instagram ( $n = 4$ , 1.2%), Tumblr ( $n = 3$ , 0.9%), and Google+ ( $n = 2$ , 0.6%). Respondents most frequently engaged in reactive message consumption behaviors such as reading CEOs' posts ( $M = 5.35$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ) and reading other fans or followers' posts and comments on the CEO's SNS page ( $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ). They engaged less frequently in proactive contributing behaviors such as participating in conversations with the CEO and other fans ( $M = 4.29$ ,  $SD = 1.90$ ), sharing the CEO's posts onto the users' own SNS pages ( $M = 4.49$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ), recommending the CEO's SNS page to the users' own network



**Fig. 2.** Results of the hypothesized model. Coefficients are standardized regression weights. For the sake of brevity, error terms of indicators and disturbances of endogenous variables were omitted from the figure. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ), and posting the CEO/company/brand related images, product reviews, and comments on the CEO’s SNS page ( $M = 4.52$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ).

Our research question inquired about publics’ motivation of engaging with CEOs on their SNS pages. Results showed that respondents followed or liked a CEO on SNSs mainly because of thought leadership (i.e., the CEO is a leader in this industry,  $M = 5.88$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ) and task attraction (i.e., the CEO is the best at what he/she does,  $M = 5.55$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). Other key motivations included information seeking (i.e., gathering information about the company’s strategies/directions/future initiatives or plans,  $M = 5.02$ ,  $SD = 1.36$ ), role modeling (i.e., wanting to be like the CEO,  $M = 5.00$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ), job-related interests (i.e., would like to work for this company when opportunities arise,  $M = 4.98$ ,  $SD = 1.42$ ), and social networking (i.e., building connections with like-minded others,  $M = 4.95$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ).

#### 4.2. Analysis of structural equation modeling

The analysis of the conceptual model involved a two-stage process: (a) an assessment of the construct validity of the measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis, and (b) an assessment of the structural model. The maximum likelihood method was employed for model estimation. The test of the measurement model demonstrated satisfactory fit to the data:  $\chi^2(2) = 3.44$ ,  $p = 0.18$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.72$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.05$  (90% confidence interval: 0.00–.11),  $SRMR = 0.01$ ,  $TLI = 0.99$ , and  $CFI = 0.99$ . The standardized factor loadings between OPR and relational trust and between OPR and relational satisfaction were both 0.86, indicating satisfactory construct validity. The multivariate normality assumption of SEM was evaluated in AMOS before the hypothesized model was estimated. Results indicated that the sample data showed a significant positive multivariate kurtosis. Therefore, bootstrapping ( $N = 2000$  samples) using the maximum likelihood method was performed to address the multivariate nonnormality of the data. The bootstrap parameter estimations did not deviate from those based on normal theory, indicating that the significant results in Fig. 2 remained significant in the bootstrapping process. The hypothesized structural model displayed in Fig. 2 demonstrated satisfactory fit to the data:  $\chi^2(2) = 3.44$ ,  $p = 0.18$ ,  $\chi^2/df = 1.72$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.05$  (90% confidence interval: 0.00–0.11),  $SRMR = 0.01$ ,  $TLI = 0.99$ , and  $CFI = 0.99$ .<sup>1</sup> All the five structural paths demonstrated significant results.

#### 4.3. Hypothesis testing

Hypotheses 1 and 2 that predicted positive effects of CEO–public engagement on perceived CEO authenticity and approachability were supported (see Fig. 2). Public engagement with corporate CEOs on SNSs demonstrated strong positive effects on perceived CEO authenticity ( $\beta = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and approachability ( $\beta = 0.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In other words, respondents who were more engaged with CEOs on their SNS pages perceived the CEO to be more authentic and approachable. In addition, H3 which proposed positive effects of CEO–public engagement on public trust of and satisfaction with the organization was confirmed. CEO–public engagement demonstrated a relatively small but significant positive effect on OPR

<sup>1</sup> The model was estimated by allowing the disturbances of perceived CEO authenticity and approachability to covariate because the two variables share a common factor–perception of the CEO.

outcomes ( $\beta = 0.08, p < 0.05$ ). When respondents were more engaged with CEOs on their SNS pages, they tended to develop stronger trust in the organization that the CEO represented and to be more satisfied with the organization.

Hypotheses 4 and 5 regarding the positive effects of perceived CEO authenticity (H4) and approachability (H5) on the quality of OPRs were both supported. Specifically, perceived CEO authenticity ( $\beta = 0.46, p < 0.001$ ) and approachability ( $\beta = 0.36, p < 0.001$ ) each demonstrated strong positive effects on OPR outcomes of trust and satisfaction. The results indicated that when the publics perceive the corporate CEO to be authentic or approachable on social media, they are more likely to trust and be satisfied with the organization. Moreover, a test of indirect effects using a bootstrap procedure ( $N = 2000$  samples) revealed that the indirect effect in paths from public engagement to relational outcomes through perceived CEO authenticity and approachability was also significant,  $\beta = 0.26, p = 0.001$  (95% CI: 0.19–0.35). In other words, perceived CEO authenticity and approachability partially mediated the effect of CEO-public SNS engagement on public trust and satisfaction with the organization.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

To serve as a stepping stone to advance the theoretical knowledge of CEO-public engagement on social media, this study provides one of the earliest empirical analyses to explore how and why publics engaged with corporate executives on SNSs. It tested the conceptual model linking CEO-public engagement to important interpersonal communicative variables of perceived authenticity and approachability as well as relational outcomes of trust and satisfaction. Based on the findings, important implications for public relations scholars, professionals, and corporate leaders are discussed.

Specifically, with regard to why and how publics engage with CEOs on social media, reasons of thought leadership and task attraction emerged as the primary motivations driving publics' liking and following CEOs on SNSs. Both motivations were directly related to CEOs' expertise and competence. Other key motivations included information seeking, job-related benefits, and social capital (i.e., building connections with like-minded others). When compared with the key motivations of public-organization social media engagement identified in previous studies, including remuneration (e.g., economic benefits such as coupons, free samples, and other promotional value), information, and entertainment (Tsai & Men, 2012), the differences indicated that engagement strategies for corporate social media communications may not work equivalently for CEO social media communication, especially considering the distinct audience needs, gratifications, and expectations. As social media is growing into a critical tool for leadership communication, listening, branding, and engagement, more research is in high demand to explore the dynamics influencing the effects of CEO social media communication to build meaningful relationships with today's digitally savvy stakeholders. In addition, most study participants predominantly engaged with CEOs on their personal SNS pages in passive message consumption activities (e.g., reading CEO and other users' posts and comments), instead of actively participating in two-way conversations (e.g., asking and answering questions), or advocating the CEOs' posts and pages (e.g., sharing CEO posts/page to one's own network).

However, CEOs who had successfully managed their SNS pages to induce deeper public engagement were perceived as more authentic and approachable, which in turn helped to reinforce publics' relationship with the organizations in terms of trust and satisfaction. Indeed, the interactive, personal, communal, and relational characteristics of social media (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009) have offered corporate CEOs an indispensable tool to converse with the publics in a real-time and spontaneous manner. Unlike traditional mediated channels (e.g., television, newspapers, magazines, and websites), which are predominantly one-way, social media platforms not only allow CEOs to share messages and information with publics directly, but also solicit feedback and listen to the publics' needs, concerns, and ideas. Thus, the CEOs who demonstrate strong social media presence and induce strong public engagement can effectively project themselves as being more open, accessible, caring, and approachable. Further, embedded in the publics' personal networks, CEOs could communicate in a personal, genuine, intimate, and friendly manner and build stronger bond with the publics (Huy & Shipilov, 2012). Therefore, instead of being seen as virtual figures who are distanced from the publics, social CEOs could be perceived as real persons with authentic personalities and characters. Previous research suggested that face-to-face communications are the most personal channel since "ordinary people" are generally considered representing greater authenticity (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Gilpin et al., 2010). Social media communication, which simulates face-to-face communication with its interactive, real-time, conversational, and personal characteristics, likewise works to facilitate authentic communication (Men, 2014). This finding also underscores the importance for organizations to become an "authentic enterprise" (Shen & Kim, 2012), driven by the unprecedented demand for visibility and transparency in the social media era.

CEO-public social engagement also directly influenced OPRs. CEOs are the public faces of the organization and can humanize the organization to internal and external stakeholders (Park & Berger, 2004). Previous research suggests that the image and leadership charisma of CEOs as portrayed in the media could influence corporate reputation (Cravens, Oliver, & Ramamoorti, 2003). Consistent with prior studies, the study findings confirmed that how CEOs presented themselves on social media affected publics' relationship with the organization. In particular, when the publics actively engaged with CEOs on social platforms, they were more attentive and receptive to the messages the CEOs conveyed about the CEOs themselves, their products, brands, and the organizations. Such continuous communication cultivated the publics' relationship with the CEO and the organization. Further, CEOs with an active social media presence and participation were perceived to be more authentic and approachable. An open, transparent, authentic, accessible, caring, and approachable leader image in turn boosted public trust toward the organization and their overall relational satisfaction. Therefore, the study provided original empirical evidence for the innate linkage between the organization and the CEO. It also expanded the growing literature on

leadership communication and social media engagement, and underlined the critical role that corporate executives play in public relations. Industry reports indicate CEO sociability is directly linked to better leadership and social CEOs are much more likely to be seen as good communicators than unsocial CEOs (Weber Shandwick, 2012). Hence, more empirical studies are needed to advance theoretical understanding of CEO sociability and its effects on leadership outcomes.

### 5.1. Strategic implications

Given the dominance of social media, organizations and their corporate leaders have the unique opportunity to capitalize on the power of social technologies by implementing engagement strategies to bolster their relationship with stakeholders. However, many corporate executives perceive a high risk and are hesitant with social media participation. According to BRANDfog's 2013 survey, risk aversion, time constraints, fear of negative feedback, and a lack of social media strategies are the primary barriers to top management's social media engagement. To help corporate leaders and their communicators craft effective social communication campaigns, strategic guidelines based on the study findings are provided.

Public relations professionals should educate CEOs about the value of social media, encourage CEOs to be open-minded, embrace the new technology trend, and actively build a social media presence. In particular, CEOs should be advised with the right messages and information aligned with organizational values, culture, goals, and business objectives and tailored to the publics' information needs and gratifications. In particular, since expertise and competence-oriented factors were the key reasons that publics are motivated to follow CEOs on social media, corporate leaders should strive to establish their leadership position in the industry and publicize their expertise and authority. For instance, other than post corporate/product relevant information, CEOs could provide their insights, strategic views, and thoughts on current issues and industry trends.

Further, research suggests organizations' current social media practices are mainly geared toward dissemination of information as a core activity to attract followers, thus fail to capitalize on social media's interactive nature (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters & Jamal, 2011). For instance, Inauen and Schoeneborn's (2014) study reported that many multinational corporations merely relied on the one-way communication model in their Twitter posts, instead of realizing the dialogic characteristics of the medium. Likewise, our study result regarding respondents' passive, low engagement level indicated that CEOs' mere presence on social media failed to adequately capitalize on the personal, communal, and collaborative features of social media for meaningful public engagement beyond the "like button." Working with their public relations teams, corporate executives should employ engagement strategies to induce more active social and communal participation on online stakeholders. CEOs can solicit ideas from the publics, participate in discussions, and listen with heart, applying the "management by walking around" leadership strategy across social platforms on a global scale. To that end, public relations as the counselor for top management should equip CEOs with a two-way, open, symmetrical public relations mindset, and effective communication and technology skills. Study findings also demonstrated the effectiveness of interpersonal approach to social communication on relational outcomes. Following the interpersonal communicative approach, blending professional and personal, corporate leaders should communicate in personal, conversational tone, actively respond to followers' posts and encourage interactions among members of the SNS community, in order to create genuine dialogues and build strong bond with online stakeholders.

### 5.2. Limitations and future research directions

Despite the original contributions, this study also encountered several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the study examined CEO social media engagement from the publics' perspective. Although it provides important insights regarding why and how publics engage with CEOs on social media, it can be limited in suggesting effective strategies of CEO social media engagement. To explore this important topic, future research could use a mixed-method approach to content analyze top rated social CEOs' social media communications or utilize case study and qualitative interviews to provide a more in-depth understanding. Second, this study focused on examining the impact of CEO-public social media engagement on publics' perceptual and relational outcomes. Future endeavors could connect CEO social media engagement to public behavioral outcomes (e.g., advocacy, positive word-of-mouth, supportive behavior, product purchase) as well as business objectives and organizational bottom line. Moreover, past studies indicate corporate executives' deep concerns with public engagement on social media, such as losing control over corporate information generated and shared on the open platform (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). While corporate transparency and authenticity has been advocated as the key to positive public engagement (Men & Tsai, 2014), more research is needed to assess the potential risks of social media engagement. Future investigations could also explore other potential mediators (e.g., empowerment, CEO image) of CEO social media engagement on public relations outcomes utilizing a larger sample size. A third limitation of this study arises from the cross-sectional survey approach, which is limited in suggesting the order of effects. To establish the causal links between the constructs, longitudinal studies or experimental approaches should be utilized in future research. At last, this study was conducted in 2014. Given the rapidly and constantly transforming landscape of social media, ongoing investigations are imperative to update our understanding of the publics' dynamic social media engagement.

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