

VALUE CO-CREATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA: A MULTISTAKEHOLDER, COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

Silvia RAVAZZANI

Università IULM
Via Carlo Bo, 1 - 20143 Milano, Italy
silvia.ravazzani@iulm.it
(Corresponding author)

Simon HAZÉE

Université catholique de Louvain, LouRIM, CCMS
Chaussée de Binche 151, 7000 Mons, Belgium
simon.hazee@uclouvain.be

(Both authors contributed equally to this paper)

Acknowledgments – The authors thank Katrien Verleye, Bryan Reber and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback on the manuscript.

**This paper is an author post-print version of a paper forthcoming
in the *Journal of Service Management*
DOI: 10.1108/JOSM-11-2021-0411**

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Abstract

Purpose – Despite an increasing body of research on value co-creation through social media, service organizations still face difficulties in leveraging the potential of social media communication to facilitate value co-creation with multiple stakeholders. This article addresses this challenge by adopting a multistakeholder, communication perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – This article uses a conceptual approach and builds upon concepts widely recognized in the public relations (PR) literature to assess communication in multistakeholder social media-mediated exchanges.

Findings – This article discusses the role of social media communication in enabling value co-creation as well as the communicative challenges that come along with it. Moreover, applying PR academic insights to the service innovation and service recovery research fields, it advances theoretical propositions that predict how service organizations can successfully build upon the social media communication fundamentals—namely dialogue, engagement, social presence, and conversational human voice—to trigger value co-creation with and among multiple stakeholders.

Originality/value – This article introduces selected relevant theoretical concepts from the PR field and develops novel theoretical propositions that are likely to make unique contributions to the service management field. The article also advances future research avenues that will help service and communication scholars together move the field forward.

Keywords – Social media communication, Value co-creation, Multistakeholder, Public relations, Service ecosystems

Paper type – Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Today's connected world has fundamentally changed how actors interact, share resources, and co-create value. For instance, through the *Nike By You* social media platform, Nike links together and communicate with diverse actors including shoes customers, design consultants and influencers, to encourage engagement and value co-creation through the generation and sharing of innovative design ideas. Among other technologies, social media have fast become an important environment for resource exchange between firms and its stakeholders. Globally, 4.55 billion actors were active social media users in 2021, with a reported growth of around 1 million new users every single day (Datareportal, 2021). In this context, firms strive to find new ways to effectively *communicate* on social media to facilitate value co-creation with and among stakeholders, all while developing or maintaining organizational reputation (Kao *et al.*, 2016).

Echoing practitioners' interest in social media, a growing body of service research examines the role of social media in the value co-creation process. For instance, Carlson *et al.* (2018) show that firms should create dialogues with customers through social media to encourage engagement and co-develop innovations. As another example, Dong *et al.* (2016) highlight the potential of social media as a channel for involving customers in the service recovery process and restoring satisfaction following a service failure. Another research stream focuses on how firms can use social media to develop online brand communities, foster relationships with customers, and enhance brand equity (e.g., Wirtz *et al.*, 2013).

Although prior service research provides useful insights into value co-creation through social media, further research is necessary for two main reasons. First, a large number of studies has focused on dyadic relationships between firms and customers (Leroi-Werelds, 2019), while the *social connectedness* and *high visibility* of social media warrant a multistakeholder perspective (Lock, 2019). For instance, Hogueve *et al.* (2019) highlight that,

in public social media environments, other actors are likely to be virtually present and create value by learning about the service recovery experience of a focal customer, making it important for service providers to not only pay attention to the complainant, but also to observing actors in order to prevent harm to the firm reputation as well as to stimulate positive word-of-mouth and future purchases. Second, while *communicative interactions* are commonly seen as the enactment of exchange and value co-creation (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006), prior service research lacks a communication perspective that would help understand how firms can successfully use social media communication as a tool to facilitate value co-creation with and among stakeholders. In response, this article uses a multistakeholder, public relations (PR) communication perspective to assess value co-creation through social media.

While authors acknowledge the variety of research paradigms coexisting in the communication field (e.g., PR, organizational communication, business communication), this conceptual paper draws primarily on the PR literature for two main reasons. First, despite being historically associated with one-way persuasion and mass publicity, PR scholarship and practice have evolved towards the effective management of stakeholder relationships according to co-creational and dialogic logics (Botan and Taylor, 2004); this paradigm shift has specifically accelerated in response to the rise of social media (Huang *et al.*, 2017). Second, as opposed to business/marketing communication research that gives prominence to particular target groups like customers/consumers, PR research uses a multistakeholder perspective (e.g., Ruoslahti, 2018) as all publics are likely to affect organizational legitimacy and reputation and especially in contemporary digital issue arenas (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010).

This article connects with recent calls for more interdisciplinary research on social media communication (Wang *et al.*, 2021). In so doing, it contributes in two main ways. First, using a multistakeholder, communication perspective derived from the PR field, this conceptual paper identifies and discusses the opportunities and challenges that come along

with social media communication and that may affect its potential for facilitating value co-creation. Introducing selected relevant concepts widely recognized in the PR literature contributes to the service management field, particularly by enhancing understanding of how firms can use social media communication as a tool to trigger value co-creation with and among stakeholders. Second, by bridging different disciplines, this article develops novel theoretical propositions and future research avenues that will help service and communication scholars together move the social media and value co-creation field forward. These propositions also have managerial value in providing reflection tools for practitioners interested in leveraging the potential of social media communication for triggering value co-creation, while also being aware of the communicative intricacies of this practice.

2. Value co-creation in service ecosystems

The concept of value (co-)creation has been discussed in the literature in various ways (see Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020 and Leroi-Werelds, 2019 for recent literature reviews). Extant literature considers value creation through a non-interactive value formation approach, where value is added to products and services and delivered by organizations. In this perspective, the value creation process is separated from the beneficiary. More recently, authors claimed that value is co-created as actors interact to integrate resources. According to this logic, organizations can only offer value propositions and the beneficiary is always a party to its own value creation (Leroi-Werelds, 2019). Extending this view, recent studies conceptualize value co-creation from a systemic perspective and highlight that value is co-created by the interaction of a multiplicity of stakeholders within service ecosystems (Zeithaml *et al.*, 2020).

Of particular importance for understanding the value co-creation process is the notion of *communicative* interactions. As Gummeson and Mele (2010) argue, “the parties interact to communicate needs and wants, thus laying the foundation for exchange” (p. 185).

Communicative interactions are seen as “the enactment of exchange” (Ballantyne and Varey, 2006, p. 346), offering actors opportunities to exchange resources and facilitate value creation experiences for and with each other. Against this backdrop, it is important to opt for a communication perspective to understand how firms can use social media communication to trigger and facilitate value co-creation in service ecosystems.

Defined as “systems of resource-integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange” (Vargo and Lusch, 2016, pp. 10-11), service ecosystems can be analyzed at different levels. Studies using macro- and meso-levels take an “helicopter view” and examine the entire ecosystem or a specific subsystem (e.g., online brand community); whereas studies at the micro-level consider a focal actor (e.g., a firm) and analyze the service ecosystem from that actor’s perspective (Danatzis *et al.*, 2021). Aiming to understand how firms can use social media communication to foster value co-creation with and among its relevant stakeholders, this conceptual paper takes a micro-level view that nevertheless accounts for higher level interdependencies.

3. A PR communication perspective

3.1. Social media communication fundamentals

Prior communication research on the affordances and role of social media is very rich and diverse. As Wang *et al.* (2021) show, previous studies examined a wide variety of social media communication-related topics (e.g., social media effects on PR outcomes, PR social media practices), through various theoretical lenses (e.g., gratification and framing theories) as well as across numerous contexts, platforms, methodologies, and stakeholder types (e.g., customers, employees, journalists, influencers).

Given this rich yet fragmented body of knowledge, communication scholars argue that no distinctive theories of social media for PR exist per se (Ngai *et al.*, 2015)¹. Against this backdrop, Kent and Li (2020) critically reviewed the social media communication literature to identify the broad theoretical elements “that are currently present in social media and need to be more widely recognized and explored” (p. 4) and, on this basis, to develop a theory of social media for PR. Dialogue, engagement, social presence, and conversational human voice emerged as the most influential communication fundamentals that best describe the nature and possibilities of social media communication for PR. Table I defines these four theoretical elements and provides an overview of related key insights.

These four influential theoretical elements are deemed relevant to understand how social media communication can facilitate value co-creation with and among multiple stakeholder due to their focus on relationship-building communicative practices adhering to co-creational and mutuality logics (Huang *et al.*, 2017; Lock, 2019). As Kent and Li (2020) put it: “Modern public relations professionals co-create meaning and shape reality via an interactive research and communication process conducted for the mutual benefit of individuals, groups, organizations, and the stakeholders and publics with whom they have social, cultural, intellectual, economic, and communicative relationships” (p. 6). The concepts of dialogue, engagement, social presence, and conversational human voice are therefore used in the following to discuss key communicative challenges, offer a balanced view of the communication management process, and inform our theoretical propositions.

[Insert Table I about here]

3.2. *The complexity of social media communication management*

¹ Social media PR scholars have generally borrowed existing concepts and models such as dialogic and excellence theories from traditional PR research, or gratifications and media richness theories from media research (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Yet, it is worth to note that such theories have been revisited in unique ways relevant to PR social media contexts, with specific endeavors giving birth to new theoretical models such as the *social-mediated crisis communication model* (Austin and Jin, 2018).

Organizations can benefit from social media communication for triggering value co-creation both externally, by encouraging stakeholders to improve or personalize brand experiences, products and services, as well as internally, by empowering employees to participate in the co-construction of corporate strategies, values, and identity (Cornelissen, 2020). Nonetheless, doing so remains challenging for many organizations. Critical communicative challenges are synthesized in the following by referring to the key communication fundamentals that embody the core affordances of social media communication (see Table I), with examples from research on various stakeholder groups.

Social media *dialogue* creates novel communication issues as organizations, in the communication clutter created by all the online exchanges about and around it, strive to position themselves and have a visible voice. No matter whether organization-related conversations are triggered by the firm itself or initiated more spontaneously by the “crowd” (Cornelissen, 2020), participating in dialogical arenas is critical since online conversations may be used, for instance, by journalists, bloggers, and influencers as news sources, and by potential customers and collaborators as credible reviews (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010). Relatedly, PR research highlights that moderating stakeholder conversations is a key challenge faced by organizations (Buhmann *et al.*, 2021).

Organizations are also faced with the challenges of how to best perform social media communication to not only foster *engagement* in publicly visible issue arenas where “communication with and among stakeholders are moving onto new stages outside the organization’s control” (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010, pp. 315-316), but also to prevent potential corporate crises and firestorms (Austin and Jin, 2018). Building on social contagion theory, PR research details the intricacy of social media and multistakeholder involvement in resource exchanges. For instance, Ravazzani and Mazzei (2018) show that employee online

dissent may spread rapidly among audiences who used to or still have relationship with the organization such as job applicants, former employees, journalists, and customers.

Additional complexity emerges when organizations enact *social presence and conversational human voice* in their social media communication as they may be perceived as mere symbolic communication and managerial rhetoric (Kent and Li, 2020). Faced with this situation, organizations take advantage of employees as credible communicators and develop social media guidelines to increase positive communication behaviors and thereby balance risk management with value co-creation (Soens and Claeys, 2021).

4. Bridging the service and PR literatures: Theoretical propositions for future research

Applying the insights derived from the PR literature to two major service research areas, namely service innovation and service recovery, this article advances 5 theoretical propositions that predict how firms can successfully leverage social media communication to trigger value co-creation with and among multiple stakeholders. The propositions explicitly incorporate the four influential social media-related theoretical elements identified by Kent and Li (2020) (see Table I). By applying PR insights to two specific service research streams, this article aims to provide a more fine-grained analysis of the role of social media communication in value co-creation.

The research streams on service innovation and service recovery were deemed relevant for three main reasons. First, recent reviews of the service literature consider these topics as research areas that offer great potential and deserve further research attention (e.g., Furrer *et al.*, 2020). Second, service scholars increasingly examine the potential of social media for co-developing service innovations (e.g., Carlson *et al.*, 2018) and recovering customers from service failures (e.g., Hogreve *et al.*, 2019). Third, several authors call for more research on service innovation and service recovery using a multistakeholder perspective. As Van

Vaerenbergh *et al.* (2019) put it: “the significant increase in new business contexts in the modern economy requires that researchers focus on more complex interactions and account for multi-actor complexity in recovery processes” (p. 113).

4.1. Research area 1: Service innovation, dialogic communication, and engagement

Firms increasingly use social media to open their innovation process and integrate resources from multiple stakeholders through, for example, online contests, project wikis and shared collaboration spaces. Using social media for co-innovation, however, requires firms to develop unique capabilities (Muninger *et al.*, 2019). Among others, previous service studies show that organizations need to create dialogues with the actors involved in the innovation process to motivate them, encourage engagement, and co-develop innovations (e.g., Carlson *et al.*, 2018).

Drawing from PR literature, the concept of *dialogical communication* seems particularly relevant for understanding the potential of social media to co-create knowledge for innovation with and among multiple stakeholders, such as suppliers, NGOs and public entities (Ruoslahti, 2018). Prior PR research indeed shows that firms can engage in dialogical communication based on the principles of mutuality (i.e., collaboration, mutual equality), propinquity (immediacy of presence), empathy (communal orientation), and commitment, to develop relationships and foster engagement with diverse central and peripheral actors in social media environments (Pera *et al.*, 2016). More specifically, PR research has delved into the dialogic communication strategies that can be used for establishing quality conversations between a firm and its stakeholders. Romenti *et al.* (2014) propose four communication strategies: concertative, framing, transformative, and generative. Transformative and generative dialogue strategies are particularly suited to online environments since they are interactive and aimed at engaging the public at large (Pang *et al.*, 2018). These two strategies imply a *centrifugal* conversational orientation to solicit multiple viewpoints and find joint

solutions. The transformative approach entails an inside-out approach where the firm directly calls for new ideas and suggestions, for example when organizations invite proposals for collectively improving products or internal policies under criticism (Romenti *et al.*, 2014). Whereas with the outside-in approach of the generative strategy, the organization's role is more of a facilitator promoting respect for diverse views, ultimately aiming at enhancing trust.

These insights on public-centered dialogue strategies are complemented by research on conversational logics of moderation, which are deemed particularly relevant to foster engagement while addressing the challenges and risks inherent to social media collaboration. Buhmann *et al.* (2021) argue that “the ‘crowdsourced conversation’ type embodies the ‘truest’ form of dialogue” (p. 3) where an organization allows a potentially high number of stakeholders to set the topic and lead the conversation to find a mutual solution. Their study provides evidence that low levels of moderation positively influence stakeholders’ attitude, trust, commitment and satisfaction; whereas the highly moderated “controlled conversation” logic, in which an organization directs conversations and is not open to dissent voices negatively affects actors’ perceptions of the organization. Taken together:

P1: In social media, centrifugal communication strategies (i.e., transformative and generative) facilitate stakeholder engagement and value co-creation through innovation co-development.

P2: The firm’s moderation level impacts the effect of such dialogic strategies on stakeholder engagement and value co-creation, such that as the level of moderation increases, the positive effects of dialogic communication strategies are attenuated.

4.2. *Research area 2: Service recovery, social presence, and conversational human voice*

Individuals generally value social interactions in situations that require ambiguity reduction such as a service recovery (De Keyser *et al.*, 2015). As such, this article argues that it is particularly important for firms to integrate the social dimensions indicated as dominant PR

approaches to social media, that is social presence and conversational human voice, when engaging in social media service recovery.

PR research shows that organizations can use various strategies to project *social presence* and influence connectivity between actors (Kent and Taylor, 2021). In particular, affective, interactive, and cohesive communication strategies are found to be effective in influencing social presence on social media, resulting in better relational outcomes including public trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Kent and Taylor, 2002). The affective strategy relates to the empathy principle of dialogic communication and refers to emotional expressions and feelings, which can be induced via the use of emoticons and humor, among others. The interactive strategy addresses the dialogic principle of mutuality and refers to messages that acknowledge other actors in the communicative exchange. The cohesive strategy taps into the dialogic principles of commitment and propinquity, which can be operationalized using phatics, salutations, and inclusive pronouns (e.g., “we”).

PR studies further demonstrate that social presence would trigger perceptions of intimacy and immediacy among actors (Men *et al.*, 2018), which is particularly relevant in the case of social media service recovery where both the focal customer (complainant) and observing stakeholders (e.g., other customers) commonly expect transparent, fast and personalized organizational responses to online complaints (e.g., Istanbulluoglu, 2017; Hogreve *et al.*, 2019). Taken together:

P3: In social media service recovery, affective, interactive, and coherence communication strategies positively influence the focal customer (complainant) and observing stakeholders’ post-recovery outcomes such as brand trust, satisfaction, and word-of-mouth.

P4: In social media service recovery, the effects of affective, interactive, and coherence communication strategies on post-recovery outcomes are mediated by feelings of social presence (i.e., intimacy and immediacy).

Firms can also integrate *conversational human voice* to provide personalized and empathetic public responses to online complaints (Schamari and Schaefer, 2015). Conversational human voice refers to an engaging and natural style of organizational communication (Kent and Li, 2020), which can positively affect the way actors evaluate both the message and the organization, typically resulting in higher levels of trust and commitment (Kelleher, 2009).

Liebrecht *et al.* (2021) identify three main linguistic tactics to establish a sense of conversational human voice through social media communication: message personalization, informal speech, and invitational rhetoric. Message personalization triggers the impression that actors involved in the communicative exchange are treated as unique individuals. This can be achieved through, for instance, the use of personal pronouns or adding a personal signature to the message. Informal speech can be defined as a familiar and casual communication style, operationalized using both nonverbal (e.g., emojis) and verbal cues (e.g., interjections such as “haha”). Invitational rhetoric tactics are used to invite actors to engage in conversation, and include stimulating dialogues, apologizing, or showing empathy, among others. Taken together, these communication principles lead to the following:

P5: In social media service recovery, message personalization, informal speech, and invitational rhetoric trigger perceptions of conversational human voice and positively affect post-recovery outcomes, including trust and brand commitment, among the focal customer and multiple observing stakeholders.

5. Toward a more impactful interdisciplinary research agenda

The critical synthesis of service research on value co-creation through social media indicated the need for more research using a communication perspective to better understand how firms can effectively use social media communication to trigger value co-creation with and among multiple stakeholders. To this end, this article built on the PR literature to develop theoretical propositions that together provide opportunities for novel empirical research, which can be tested using different methods. For instance, researchers might collaborate with an organization to develop a field experiment in which they manipulate the communication strategies used in their social media service recovery exchanges and measure the effects on relevant post-recovery outcomes. These results would provide evidence of the effects of affective, interactive, and coherence communication on focal customer and observing stakeholders in online service recovery (Proposition 3). To confirm the proposed mediation effects, stakeholders could also be surveyed regarding their intimacy and immediacy perceptions shortly after the treatments, followed by tests on performance outcomes (e.g., trust, engagement) (Proposition 4).

To ensure the impact of the above propositions and further extend the research streams on service innovation and service recovery via social media, Table II advances additional research questions, derived from the present propositions, that should help craft an even more impactful interdisciplinary research program. These research questions also incorporate emerging related research areas that this article did not fully cover but that are yet considered as highly topical in both service and communication science.

[Insert Table II about here]

6. Conclusion

Considering the importance of communicative interactions for resource exchange and value co-creation, this article adopted a communication, multistakeholder perspective derived from the PR field to shed light on how firms can successfully leverage social media communication

to facilitate value co-creation with and among multiple stakeholders. Based on relevant service research streams and key theoretical PR communication elements, this article developed 5 theoretical propositions that predict how firms can effectively use social media communication to facilitate value co-creation. Moreover, this article advances additional research questions that provide exciting opportunities for interdisciplinary research. With this article, authors hope that their efforts to introduce a PR lens to the service management field will help improve theory and practice on value co-creation through social media.

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Table I: Key theoretical communication elements proposed by Kent and Li (2020)

Theoretical element	Description and comments	Illustrative sources
Dialogue	Based on the principles of mutuality (collaboration, spirit of mutual equality), propinquity (immediacy of presence, temporal flow, engagement), empathy (supportiveness, communal orientation, confirmation), risk (vulnerability, unanticipated consequences, recognition of strange otherness), and commitment (genuineness, commitment to conversation and to interpretation)	Kent and Taylor (2002), Pang <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Engagement	- Social media are enablers of dialogical communication aimed at organization-stakeholder relationship building - The level of interaction a stakeholder shows toward an organization influences stakeholder attitudes, emotions, and actions toward the organization - Social media can facilitate behavioral engagement interactions that form connections among stakeholders and organizations as well as social action	Kent and Taylor (2002, 2021)
Social presence	- The acoustic, visual, and physical contact that can be achieved between two communicating entities are important elements of social connectivity - Social media can grant social presence in terms of intimacy and immediacy of communication, which increases organizations' online salience and credibility	Men <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Conversational human voice	- An engaging and natural style of organizational communication can lead to key relational outcomes such as trust, control mutuality, and commitment - Organizations can use social media to project a more genuine image of themselves and positively shape stakeholder evaluations	Kelleher (2009), Liebrecht <i>et al.</i> (2021)

Table II: Further research agenda for service and communication research

Research questions
<i>Service (co-)innovation via social media</i>
• When might a moderated, controlled conversation logic outperforms a crowdsourced conversation logic in a service co-innovation context? • What are the unique benefits, challenges, and risks associated with using an inside-out versus an outside-in communication approach in service co-innovation social media campaigns? • In which circumstances will the dialogic communication principles of mutuality and propinquity likely distract from, rather than contribute to, multistakeholder engagement in the co-design innovation process?
<i>Social media service recovery</i>
• What situational factors (e.g., failure severity, stability, and controllability) determine the relative effectiveness of affective, interactive, and coherence communication strategies in social media service recovery? • What communication tactic (message personalization, informal speech, and invitational rhetoric) is most impactful in social media service recovery? • To what extent and how should firms actively engage observing stakeholders (e.g., brand ambassadors) in the interactional exchanges between the firm and the complainant in social media service recovery?
<i>Cross-cutting issues</i>
• How can and should organizations moderate conversations while also preventing hate speech and anti-social behaviors from negatively affecting dialogic engagement of multiple stakeholders in social media contexts? • How can and should organizations reduce social media illiteracy to enable communicative interactions and value co-creation among <i>all</i> stakeholders? • How can and should organizations enhance social media privacy and security to protect stakeholders, enhance trust and ultimately engagement?