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The Effects of Blog-Mediated Public Relations (BMPR) on Relational Trust

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Abstract

Key features of blog-mediated public relations are conducive to initiating and nurturing relationships with publics. As a result, blogs have emerged as a new venue for public relations in recent years. Many public relations practitioners have come to realize that blogging is not just a fad and have recognized a growing trend of blogging adoption in the industry—suggesting a need for common principles of successful public relations blogging practices. This study selected the following critical features of effective blog-mediated public relations: salience of narrative structure, dialogical self, blogger credibility, and interactivity. Using these concepts, the researchers proposed a theoretical model in explaining relational trust as a central outcome of effective blog-mediated public relations. Findings showed that dialogical self in blog posts enhanced interactivity, which in turn led to an increase in relational trust. Additionally, this study found that blogger credibility played a positive role in relational trust.

### The Effects of Blog-Mediated Public Relations (BMPR) on Relational Trust

As an increasing number of public relations practitioners find opportunities in the blogosphere, blogs have emerged as a new venue for public relations (Scoble & Israel, 2006; Scott, 2007). A blog, a simple version of “Web-based log” or “weblog,” is a personal publishing or content management system on the Internet at which an author or multiple authors can publish information on a variety of topics, which is often displayed in a reverse-chronological order (Scoble & Israel, 2006; Wright, 2006). Because most bloggers, or blog authors, intended to have conversations with readers or visitors, blogs are in general conducive for two-way communication (Baker & Green, 2005, May 2).

As such, blogs have been suggested as a useful tool for enabling dialogue and feedback, which can initiate and nurture relationships between an organization and its publics (McClure, 2007, February 26). This is why many public relations practitioners have come to realize that blogging is not just a fad and have recognized a growing trend of blogging adoption in the industry (Porter Novelli, 2007, August; Scoble & Israel, 2006; Scott, 2007). At a time when a relational perspective of public relations has become increasingly influential in the field (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000), public relations can play a pivotal role in participatory organization-public communication through effective blog-mediated public relations (McClure, 2007, February 26).

There has been a cornucopia of discussion in the blogosphere regarding principles of effective blog-mediated public relations (hereafter called “BMPR”) such as storytelling, dialogue, credibility, transparency, authenticity, authority, and interactivity (Scoble & Israel, 2006). However, such discussion has been often limited to technical aspects of communication and lacked clear conceptualization. Additionally, measuring the success of BMPR is a substantially challenging task. Due to the difficulty and complexity of measuring intangible outcomes (e.g.,

relational trust or publics' loyalty), public relations professionals tend to focus more on tangible outputs such as comments, trackbacks and links generated (Paine & Lark, 2005; Rubel, 2005).

The purpose of this research is to conceptualize and empirically test a model of BMPR, which will explain how concepts of narrative structure, dialogue, and blogger credibility are attributed to relational trust, one of the key outcomes of BMPR (McClure, 2007, February 26). Additionally, the proposed model will examine a mediating role of interactivity which connects effects of narrative structure, dialogue, and blogger credibility to relational trust.

### Literature Review

#### *Relational Trust in Blog-mediated Public Relations (BMPR)*

Trust is important to organizational life in every situation. Trust has been studied from various disciplines, which include interpersonal communication (Burgoon & Hale, 1984), interpersonal relationships (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Larzelere & Huston, 1980), marketing (McAllister, 1995; Moorman, Deshpande, & Zaltman, 1993), and public relations (Ki & Hon, 2007; Yang, 2007). For example, Yang (2007) found that relational trust is one of the key antecedents of favorable organizational reputation.

Despite the complexity of the construct, one's willingness to take a risk (or to be vulnerable or to rely on the other party) in the confidence (or beliefs or expectations) of the relational partner's benevolence, honesty, reliability and integrity has been a common denominator in defining relational trust (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Mishra, 1996; Moorman et al., 1993; Pearce, 1974). In previous public relations research, Ki and Hon (2007) and Yang (2007) used three dimensions of relational trust: integrity, dependability, and competence. In addition to the three dimensions of relational trust, we added transparency to measure relational trust in this current study. Many professional experts indeed have suggested that *transparency* is a

key dimension of relational trust in BMPR (Scoble & Israel, 2006). This study defines the four distinct dimensions of relational trust as follows:

1. *Competence* refers to the ability of a party to capably perform his or her duties and obligations (Huang, 2001). It includes such characteristics as technical skills, expertise, and timeliness in completing work (Butler, 1991; Gabarro, 1978; Mishra, 1996; Moorman et al., 1993; White, 2005).
2. *Dependability* refers to a relational partner's reliability based on predictability and consistency in acts and words (Gabarro, 1978; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Mishra, 1996; Pearce, 1974; Schlenker, Helm, & Tedeschi, 1973). In this regard, Schlenker and his colleagues (1973) stated, "A promiser who did not back up his words with corresponding deeds soon would be distrusted" (p. 420).
3. *Integrity* refers to a relational partner's perceived unwillingness to sacrifice ethical standards to achieve individual or organizational objectives (Gabarro, 1978; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Larzelere & Huston, 1980; Mishra, 1996; Moorman et al., 1993; White, 2005). It includes such characteristics as honesty, discreetness, confidentiality, and concern or care for relational partners.
4. *Transparency* refers to a relational partner's perceived willingness to share ideas and information freely and frankly (Gabarro, 1978; Mishra, 1996; Butler, 1991).

As in other areas of public relations practice, we believe that the concept of relational trust is a key variable for assessing the effectiveness of BMPR. More specifically, each of the four dimensions of trust is useful in assessing blog visitors' trust judgment in BMPR. For example, the dependability of a blog cannot be achieved without regular updates, the continued truth of the information provided, and sincere responses to inquiries. The integrity of a blogger's motivation is

an important attribute that gives rise to the trust judgment among blog visitors. Publics' perceptions that the organization is benevolent, honest and sincere are important when assessing the future relationship (Larzelere & Huston, 1980). Transparency is also an important dimension as blog visitors generally want to engage in direct and candid communication with organizations (Scoble & Israel, 2006).

*Variables that Influence Relational Trust in Blog-mediated Public Relations (BMPR)*

*Saliency of narrative structure.* Blogs can be explained in many ways through the conception of a narrative. First, the informal tone used in blogs is a critical aspect to be considered in terms of narrative construction. Doostdar (2004) stated, "Blogs in general adopt a much more *informal and personal tone* [italics added] than what is customary in a newspaper, in part because of a perceived immediacy and intimacy in the relationship between the blogger and his or her visitors" (p.654).

Second, bloggers frame their experiences in the form of stories, not as advocacy pronouncements or official statements; they make their experiences accessible to their readers and listeners (i.e., site visitors) through the mode of storytelling (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). Without the presence of a blogger and the exhibition of his or her life in some respect, a blog is nothing more than a hollow record that does not yield any meaning to visitors. In this sense, a discernible human character's voice positions a blog in a place that Kerby (1991) considered as the center of a *narrative*.

Third, a blog is a narrative because blogs are organized over time— with content displayed in reverse-chronological order, as with other types of narratives (Bruner, 1986; Escalas, 2004). K. Gergen and M. Gergen (1988) referred to "time and coherence among events" as the defining characteristics of narratives. They argued that individual attempts to establish coherent

connections among life events are critical to the development of a self-narrative. In this process, the presentation of an “I” or “Self” is not a result of random acts, but is a strategic and goal-directed self-presentation in terms described by Goffman (1959).

Therefore, the fourth element of a blog as a narrative is the seeking of imagined or salient audiences. Bloggers who are engaged in the strategic task of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) continuously investigate who constitutes their imaginary audiences and who are the salient commentators. The ability to imagine significant audiences and to investigate which individuals and groups are prominent among them—to put oneself in their places and anticipate how they are likely to interpret and respond—is the basis of effective blog-mediated communication (Higgins, 1992; Schlenker & Wowra, 2003). Therefore, when public relations uses blogs as a medium to talk with publics (i.e., blog-mediated public relations), salience of narrative structure in blog posts becomes critical in enhancing relational trust with publics—especially in the dimensions of transparency and integrity (Scoble & Israel, 2006). The absence or lack of salient narrative structure often makes blog visitors become suspicious of the blog’s manipulative purpose. Consequently, this increased suspicion can lead to the decrease in relational trust. For example, a common case of manipulative blogs is a fake blog (i.e., commonly called “flog” or “flack blog”), as it was employed in the Wal-Mart’s fake grassroots campaign (Gogoi, 2006, October 8). Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H1: A blog post in salient narrative structure will result in more relational trust.

*Dialogical self.* *Two-way* and *symmetry* dimensions of public relations involves utilizing organization-public dialogue to bring about symbiotic changes and mutual betterment for both parties (J. E. Grunig, 2001). Previous research has found that *two-way* and *symmetry* dimensions of public relations, as compared to other dimensions of public relations, are conducive to

cultivating relational trust (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). BMPR can contribute to such dimensions of public relations because of dialogical self: a blog cannot exist unless it allows for the existence of a dialogical thread or the narrative construction of meaning through relational communications. Therefore, a blogger's "self," created in the process of ongoing interactions with others, can be best described as a "dialogical self" (Josselson, 1993). Within the blogosphere, a blogger is best represented by the dialogical self. Not only do bloggers and their audiences share and discuss their ideas and perspectives freely, but they also respect the distinctive boundaries defined by the different self-evaluative systems of their audience members.

The dialogical self employs a so-called "*invitational rhetoric*" as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination (Foss & Griffin, 1995). The philosophy underlying this invitational rhetoric is similar to that of *two-way* and *symmetry* dimensions of public relation (J. E. Grunig, 2001) or "social eloquence" (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In other words, the communication goals of the dialogic self lie not in persuasion or coercion but in the mutual understanding and appreciation of different viewpoints (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Thus, the value that the dialogical self appreciates is not in the gaining of control over others but in the recognition of each individual's inherent uniqueness (Foss & Griffin, 1995). The narrative of the dialogical self asks members of publics to feel the narrator's truth and thus to become fully engaged in communication with it (Bochner, et al., 1997).

Based on the review of the literature and the discussion, the following hypothesis is posited regarding the effect of dialogical self in a blog post on relational trust:

H2: A blog post delivered by high dialogical self will result in more relational trust.

*Perceived blogger credibility.* A communicator's credibility is a critical element in forming blog readership. Blogger credibility is not much different from *source credibility* because a

blogger (or a blog author) is ultimately the source of a message in a blog. There are structural advantages of blogger credibility in BMPR. Since BMPR is regularly updated as a narrative and are often circulated through an RSS (i.e., Really Simple Syndication) feed, regular readers can easily find several social or relational cues about the blogger, which in turn lead to the formulation of credibility perceptions.

Thanks to those social or relational cues, both regular readers and casual visitors can quickly discern those with whom the blogger mainly communicates, to whom they primarily send messages, and the reason why they blog. Indeed, when one considers those blogs with established and significant longevity, it may be safe to say that making a credibility judgment about a blogger is easier and more accurate than making one about any other communicators encountered in other types of online communications such as chatting, bulletin boards, or e-commerce sites.

One thing that must be considered is that blogger credibility must be described from a *relational communication* point of view. In other words, perceived blogger credibility is not static and is often renewed through the process of relational communication. Some researchers provide valuable insights about what factors influence the perceived credibility of a relational partner. For instance, Burgoon and Hale (1984) detailed the structure of factors drawn out of previous relational communication studies. What is common in most credibility research (Burgoon & Hale, 1984; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; McCroskey, Hamilton, & Weiner, 1974; McCroskey, Holdridge, & Toomb, 1974) is that expertise and trustworthiness of the source are believed to influence the perception of one's credibility about communicators.

According to Burgoon and Hale (1984), the trustworthiness (or character) factor “presages a facet of relational communication recognized by Millar and Rogers (1976) as one of three transactional dimensions of relationships—trust” (p. 201). They further argued, “Given the status

of trust as a cornerstone in the development of close interpersonal relationships, we should consider a class of messages explicitly designed to convey one's trustworthiness, as well as one's belief in another's sincerity, beneficence, and so forth" (Burgoon & Hale, 1984, p. 201).

Therefore, based on the review of the literature and the discussion, the following hypothesis is posited regarding the effect of blogger credibility on relational trust:

H3: A high blogger credibility will generate more relational trust.

#### *Interactivity in Relational Communication: A Mediator*

While interactivity has been the focus of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the concept has often been defined and measured technically. In most Internet-related research, interactivity is interpreted as the computer's capability to exchange information between users and the interface. In this functional view, interactivity was simply measured as the number of functional features included on a Web site, such as e-mail links, feedback forms, and audio or video downloads (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003). Therefore, Sundar et al. (2003) criticized: "The degree to which these functions are used and the extent to which they actually serve the dialogue or discourse function do not appear to be part of the concept's definition" (p. 33).

Rafaeli (1988) challenged the functional view of interactivity, saying, "interactivity is not a characteristic of the medium." Drawing a theoretical explication from human communications, he defined interactivity as "the manner in which conversational interaction as an iterative process leads to jointly produced meaning" (Rafaeli, 1988).

Interactivity is more difficult to measure than to define since it is not a single state at a specific moment but a dynamic process during relational communications. That is, as Ha and James (1998) defined, the function of interactivity is the "extent to which the communicator and

the audience respond to, or are willing to facilitate, each other's communication needs (p. 461)."

Summarizing Ha and James (1998) and Burgoon et al. (2002), interactivity in human communication is more appropriate if it is defined and measured by psychological factors than by behavioral outcomes. Thus, interactivity encompasses the likelihood of engagement in interaction, the perceived ease of interaction, and the degree of rapport that is activated.

In the blogosphere, not every blog warrants interactivity. A blog that is seldom updated and without any notice, features pretentious stories, or mainly delivers mainstream news or links to others' posts is less likely to attract readers' interest, thus resulting in less interactivity. In other words, a blog that lacks narrative structure is the least likely to generate interactivity. A blogger's self style is also an important predictor of the degree of interactivity generated. A dialogical self is more likely to elicit interactivity than persuasive self. Readers of a blog would feel an internal reluctance to interact with bloggers if they perceive them to be paternalistic, authoritative, not listening, or manipulating. Finally, blogger credibility influences the degree of interactivity that a blogger is given. Not only do people want to interact with expert and trustworthy bloggers, but they also like talking with friendly and sociable bloggers. Therefore, all three exogenous factors discussed earlier are positively associated with the degree of interactivity generated by a blog.

An emerging research agenda is whether this increased interactivity is connected to the intended outcome of BMPR—building relational *trust*. Indeed, some scholars have argued that interactivity in Web-based public relations provides an immense opportunity for practitioners to build *relationships* with the key publics (Nel, Niekert, Berthon, & Davies, 1999) as well as promotes symmetrical communication (Ha & Pratt, 2000).

Based on the review of the literature and the discussion, the following hypotheses are posited regarding the effect of interactivity on relational trust and effects of the three factors (i.e.,

salient narrative structure, dialogical self, and blogger credibility) on interactivity:

H4: Interactivity is positively associated with relational trust.

H5: The effect of narrative structure on relational trust will be mediated by interactivity.

H6: The effect of dialogical self on relational trust will be mediated by interactivity.

H7: The effect of blogger credibility on relational trust will be mediated by interactivity.

## Method

### *Overview of the Experiment*

To test the proposed theoretical model, an experiment was conducted on the Web by manipulating blogger credibility, narrative structure, and dialogical self. In a 2 (blogger credibility: high vs. low) x 2 (narrative structure: high vs. low) x 2 (dialogical self: high vs. low) between-participant design, the participants read blog posts written by Susan Becker, Vice President of Marketing and Product Development at *Intelli-Q*, a (fictitious) company that produces personal computing hardware products.

### *Experimental Stimuli*

*Blogger credibility.* Blogger credibility was manipulated by presenting participants with a brief biographical sketch for a person called Susan Becker before their reading of her blog posts. In the high credibility condition, the biographical sketch of educational and professional experiences was more relevant to the current position (i.e., Vice President of Marketing and Product Development) than that in the low credibility condition (see the Appendix for sample blog posts).

*Narrative structure.* We manipulated blog narrative structure by adjusting the extent to which blog posts portrayed well-defined personal life events—as opposed to simply delivering news or general knowledge. The content of the blog post was virtually the same, and only the story's narrative styles were manipulated.

*Dialogical self.* Dialogical self was manipulated by a blog post which also had the same content (between conditions of the high and the low dialogical self) but was manipulated to show Susan Becker expressing either her dialogical self or her persuasive self.

*Pretest manipulation check.* With 48 students who were in a separate pool of participants, a pretest was conducted to ensure that the scripts developed for each version of the experimental conditions had intended effects. All three variables were successfully manipulated at  $p < .001$ . First, blogger credibility was successfully manipulated ( $t = 8.93, df = 46, p < .001$ ). The mean scores for the high and low blogger credibility were 6.0 ( $SD = .7$ ) and 3.0 ( $SD = .9$ ), respectively, on six 7-point semantic differential scales. Second, blog's narrative structure was also successfully manipulated ( $t = 8.9, df = 46, p < .001$ ). The mean scores for the high and low blog narrative structure were 5.3 ( $SD = .9$ ) and 3.0 ( $SD = 1.1$ ), respectively, on four 7-point scale items. When it comes to dialogical self, those who were assigned to the high condition ( $M = 5.1, SD = .7$ ) rated significantly higher on seven 7-point dialogical self scale items than counterparts in the low dialogical self condition ( $M = 3.9, SD = .9, t = 5.12, df = 46, p < .001$ ).

#### *Participants*

Participants were 314 students at four large public universities and a large private university in the United States. All students participated in the experiment voluntarily, but they received extra credit for completing the questionnaire. Courses varied from mass communication research methods to public relations principles/campaigns.

Selecting college students for our subjects was appropriate for several reasons. College students are one of the most important users of USB Flash drives, which are the topic of our experimental instrument. Two-hundred-twenty-one participants (70.4 %) reported that they were current users of USB Flash Drives. Also, students are a group of active blog users.

Two-hundred-twenty-six participants (83.4 %) reported that they have read blogs; Sixty-seven participants (21.3 %) reported that they had their own blogs. This suggests that most participants were familiar enough to blogging so that they could discern the effectiveness of BMPR.

Among 314 participants who were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental groups, 305 participants reported their gender (female = 71.0%) and age ( $M = 20.8$  with  $SD = 1.7$ ). Regarding all manipulated variables, no significant difference existed in the pooled sample from the five universities: (1) blogger credibility,  $F(4, 308) = 1.48, p = .21$ ; (2) narrative structure,  $F(4, 307) = .56, p = .70$ ; and (3) dialogical self,  $F(4, 308) = .34, p = .85$ .

### *Procedure*

The experiment was conducted exclusively on the Web. All experimental materials including blog posts and a questionnaire were posted on the Web (see Appendix for blog post examples). Based on the experimental design of this study, subjects who participated in this experiment were randomly assigned to eight different experimental groups (i.e., high vs. low blogger credibility x high vs. low narrative structure x high vs. low dialogical self).

Participants who agreed to voluntarily participate in this study were asked to sign up for this experiment by registering their email address with the investigators of the study. Each participant was then randomly assigned to one of eight conditions, and was sent an invitational email message that included a Web link to a designated condition. All other procedures were very close to those of laboratory experiments except that the reading time for experimental stimuli was strictly controlled by a JavaScript program. In other words, participants were expected to read the experimental stimuli during the enforced time intervals by making a next button appear on the screen after the minimum time passage.

*Blogger credibility.* All participants were asked to answer several questions regarding

their involvement and personal experience with Internet security issues, blogs, and USB Flash Drives. Then, participants in the experimental conditions read the biography for Susan Becker, whose information was varied in two levels of *blogger credibility*. Finally, participants answered six 7-point semantic differential scales (trustworthy, expert, reliable, intelligent, professional, and experienced). Those items were adapted from Hovland, Janis, and Kelley (1953); McCroskey, Holdridge, and Toomb (1974); and Burgoon and Hale (1984).

*Narrative structure.* Participants in the experimental conditions read a product publicity post, written by Susan Becker, titled “E-Doctor Anti Virus on *Intelli-Q* Smart Drive,” with a varying extent of *narrative structure* in two levels. After reading this blog post, participants answered four 7-point items adapted from Escalas’ (2004) *Narrative Structure Coding Scale*: (1) showing personal engagement, (2) demonstrating the blogger’s feeling/thinking, (3) having a well-defined beginning, middle, and ending of a story, and (4) talking about specific, particular events, rather than delivering news or general knowledge.

*Dialogical self.* For the manipulation of dialogical self, participants were provided with a blog post, titled “A Minority Revolution,” in which Susan Becker’s *dialogic self* was varied in two levels. Participants then answered seven 7-point items adapted from Foss and Griffin’s (1995) “invitational rhetoric” framework: The blogger (1) seems to make an effort to respond to comments left on her blog, (2) seems to ignore others’ perspectives or opinions, (3) seems arrogant, (4) tends to be authoritative, (5) seeks control over others, (6) seems to be aware of the audience, and (7) tries to teach others.

*Dependent measures.* Interactivity was measured with five items on a 7-point interactivity scale, which was adapted from Burgoon et al. (2002): (1) how interested participants were in reading the blog’s posts, (2) how likely participants would be to leave a comment if they were a

regular reader of Susan Becker's blog, (3) how comfortable participants would feel if they were asked to interact with the blogger, (4) how connected participants feel to Susan Becker's ideas and thoughts, and (5) how likely participants would be to link to Susan Becker's post from their own website or blog if they have one.

Finally, relational trust was measured through fifteen 7-point scale items. As summarized earlier, those items constituted four dimensions: competence, dependability, integrity, and transparency. For example, the measurement items for relational trust are "The blogger has good communication skills" (an example of competence), "If I were to share my problems with the blogger, I know she would respond caringly" (an example of dependability), "I believe that the blogger would show consistency between her words and actions" (an example of integrity), and "I have a good sense of what the blogger will say and do in most situations" (an example of transparency).

*Reliability of measurement items.* To examine the reliability of each index of both independent and dependent variables, Cronbach's alpha was calculated. The reliability of blogger credibility was the highest ( $\alpha = .94$ ) among all other indexes, followed by relational trust ( $\alpha = .90$ ), interactivity ( $\alpha = .81$ ), narrative structure ( $\alpha = .80$ ) and dialogical self ( $\alpha = .74$ ). Thus, all the measures that constituted each index were high (or at least high enough) to be used as reliable measures of each theoretical construct.

## Results

### *Manipulation Checks*

All three independent variables were successfully manipulated at  $p < .001$ . First, participants assigned to the high blogger credibility condition rated a mean of 5.4 ( $SD = 1.0$ ) on a 7-point credibility scale with 6 items, while counterparts in a low condition rated a mean of 3.6

( $SD = 1.1$ ),  $t = 14.74$ ,  $df = 306$ ,  $p < .001$ . Second, the mean scores for the high and low narrative structure were 5.1 ( $SD = 1.0$ ) and 3.9 ( $SD = 1.0$ ), respectively, on four 7-point scale items ( $t = 11.22$ ,  $df = 306$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Finally, those who were assigned to the high dialogical self condition ( $M = 4.7$ ,  $SD = .9$ ) rated significantly higher on seven 7-point dialogical self scale items than counterparts in the low dialogical self condition ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = .8$ ,  $t = 5.72$ ,  $df = 303$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### *Tests of Hypotheses 1 to 3*

In hypotheses 1 to 3, it was posited that high levels of narrative structure, dialogical self, and blogger credibility would result in more relational trust than low levels of those variables. To test these hypotheses, a t-test was conducted. The results of the t-test showed that only blogger credibility made a statistical difference in the perceived relational trust by different levels of credibility. Participants in the high-credibility group ( $M = 4.37$ ,  $SD = .84$ ) had a higher relational trust score than in the low-credibility group ( $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = .74$ ,  $t = 4.20$ ,  $df = 279$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Thus, H3 was supported, while neither H1 nor H2 was supported.

*Post-hoc analysis.* To examine if there was interaction between groups, a three-way ANOVA was run with narrative structure, dialogical self, and blogger credibility used as a between-groups factor. A significant main effect of blogger credibility emerged from the three-way analysis of variance. Blogger credibility accounted for 7% of the total variability of the total effect,  $F(1, 273) = 19.23$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, no interaction was found.

#### *Tests of Hypotheses 4 to 7: A Path Analysis*

To estimate parameters in the proposed path model, AMOS V.6, a structural equation model (SEM) program, was used based on the ML (Maximum Likelihood) method (see Figure 1 for detailed results of the path model). According to Table 1, there are three significant bivariate correlations between variables in the proposed path model: relational trust and blogger credibility

( $r = .25, p \leq .001$ ), blogger credibility and interactivity ( $r = .36, p \leq .001$ ), and dialogical self and interactivity ( $r = .20, p \leq .001$ ). The mean score for interactivity was 2.96 ( $SD = 1.15$ ) and the mean score for relational trust was 4.19 ( $SD = .82$ ).

*Hypothesis 4: The effect of interactivity on relational trust.* In terms of direct effects, there are three significant direct effects in the proposed BMPR model. First, regarding relational trust, as shown in Table 2, blogger credibility and interactivity were significant predictors: the effect of blogger credibility ( $\beta = .23, b = .37, S.E. = .09, p < .001$ ) and interactivity ( $\beta = .35, b = .25, S.E. = .04, p < .001$ ). It is interesting to see that, among the three independent variables, blogger credibility was the one that directly influenced relational trust by a non-chance amount. The mediator (i.e., interactivity) was also a significant predictor of the dependent variable (i.e., relational trust); therefore, hypothesis 4 (i.e., the effect of interactivity on trust) was supported.

Second, as for interactivity, Table 2 shows that dialogical self was a significant predictor ( $\beta = .20, b = .46, S.E. = .13, p < .001$ ). The results revealed that the three independent variables had differential paths of structural influences on the mediator and the dependent variable in the proposed model. That is, to directly explain relational trust, there was a significant effect of blogger credibility, whereas dialogical self significantly explained the extent of interactivity.

*Hypothesis 5 to 7: Mediation effects.* In addition to such direct effects, mediation/indirect effects were tested in the proposed model, in which *interactivity* mediates the effects of the three independent variables (i.e., narrative structure, dialogical self, and blogger credibility) on the dependent variable (i.e., relational trust).

Following Baron and Kenny Steps, mediation tests were conducted using Sobel  $z$  scores for statistical decisions. For the three mediated paths, the researchers found that interactivity significantly mediated only the effect of dialogical self on relational trust (i.e., dialogical self  $\rightarrow$

interactivity → relational trust). The Sobel  $z$  statistic was 3.11 and significant at  $p = .001$ . And the final  $\beta$  coefficient of this mediated route (the effect of dialogical self on trust) was zero, suggesting that this mediation effect was very strong. Therefore, hypothesis 6 (i.e., the effect of dialogical self on trust) was supported; other hypotheses, related to mediation effects (i.e., hypothesis 5 and 7), failed to be supported in this research.

### Discussion

In the tests of hypotheses 1 to 3, only one treatment effect of blogger credibility was found. While our expectation of a direct effect of dialogical self was not corroborated, dialogical self eventually led to relational trust mediated by interactivity. It is one of the most important findings in the present study. In other words, for effective BMPR, the interactivity of blogs is the key factor that is fostered by dialogical self portrayed in blog posts. Results of the strong mediation effect imply that interactivity is a strong variable that connects dialogical self to relational trust. Additionally, this study suggests that the credibility of blog authors has a strong effect on relational trust with site visitors.

The results that narrative structure contributed to neither relational trust nor interactivity leave room for discussion. Without question, narrative structure is one of the important characteristics in the proposed BMPR model. Previous research has suggested salient narrative structure is effective especially in creating “affective” responses (i.e., arousing positive emotions by absorption in narratives) (Green & Brock, 2000). It can be possible that, rather than interactivity of BMPR, emotions (or other affective variables such as anger or enjoyment) can be a relevant mediator that connects salience in narrative structure to relational trust in BMPR. Future studies can advance this study by examining a relevant mediator between narrative and relational trust in BMPR. Findings that desirable outcomes of BMPR could be achieved by the dialogic voice of an

organizational blogger and blogger credibility suggest important implications to public relations practitioners. First of all, dialogical self, in the test of this model, was indirectly related to relational trust. Dialogical self employs so-called invitation rhetoric in communicating with readers. When an organizational blogger sincerely responds to a reader's feedback and respects others' opinions, he or she will generate more interactivity. Writing should be a two-way symmetrical mode of public relations to induce a high dialogical self.

The role of interactivity in mediating the impact of dialogical self on relational trust is also noteworthy. Unlike the publicity-driven public relations model, the success of a communication process and outcomes in BMPR is influenced by the degree of interactivity generated. In this study, we have argued that the discussion about the concept of interactivity should go beyond the functional aspects of interactivity. Not only did the dialogical self variable have a strong correlation with the interactivity, but also the effects on relational trust were mediated by interactivity. The findings also substantiate the construct validity of the interactivity.

This present study has taken a first step toward illuminating the role of interactivity and dialogical self in BMPR in increasing relational trust. We employed structural equation modeling to provide nomological validation (Ohanian, 1990; Peter, 1981), which entailed an investigation of the theoretical relationship between the scores of each exogenous variables and relational trust mediated by interactivity. Although the results of the present study have theoretical and managerial implications for both researchers and practitioners, they are subject to certain limitations. First, unlike readers in an experimentally controlled setting, blog readers in a natural setting have different motivations to visit or read an organizational blog. Readers in a natural setting also have a predisposition to a certain organization before they visit or read the organization's blog. Future research should attempt to validate the model in a natural setting.

Additionally, in defining blogger credibility, we relied on the traditional two-factor model by Hovland and his colleagues. However, several communication researchers (Berlo, Lemert, & Mertz, 1969; McCroskey, Hamilton et al., 1974; McCroskey, Holdridge et al., 1974) have suggested there are more than two factors in relational communications. For instance, Berlo et al. (1969) considered dynamism, an interacting partner's liveliness and energy level, as an important factor in forming credibility perception in relational communication. It will be interesting to explore such additional attributes of BMPR and their roles in forming blogger credibility. Also, regarding effects of narrative structure in BMPR, the role of publics' emotional responses can be studied in future research. For example, in crisis communication, the effect of narrative structure in BMPR can be tested in attenuating publics' negative emotions (such as anger) that would lead to better post-crisis perceptions.

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*Table 1*  
*Correlations and Descriptive Statistics*

	1	2	3	4	5	<i>M<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Blogger Credibility	1					– <sup>b</sup>	–
2. Narrative Structure	.02	1				–	–
3. Dialogical Self	.02	.05	1			–	–
4. Interactivity	.05	.07	.20***	1		2.96	1.15
5. Trust	.25***	-.06	.07	.36***	1	4.19	.82

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>All measurement items are 7-point scales. For interactivity and trust, summative composites of five items and fifteen items were averaged.

<sup>b</sup>As for exogenous variables, mean scores and standard deviations are omitted here as those variables are dummy variables representing each experimental condition (1 = high, 0 = low).

\*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

Table 2

Path Analysis: Direct Effects

<i>IV</i>	<i>DV</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
Narrative Structure	Relational	-1.13	.09	-.08	.140
	Trust				
Dialogical Self	Relational	.02	.09	.02	.786
	Trust				
Blogger Credibility	Relational	.37	.09	.23	***
	Trust				
Interactivity	Relational	.25	.04	.35	***
	Trust				
Narrative Structure	Interactivity	.13	.13	.06	.327
Dialogical Self	Interactivity	.46	.13	.20	***
Blogger Credibility	Interactivity	.13	.13	.06	.330

*Note.* Each of exogenous variables was dummy-coded. The dependent measure of trust shows the average of fifteen items on a 7-point scale, with higher values indicating higher perceived trust.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

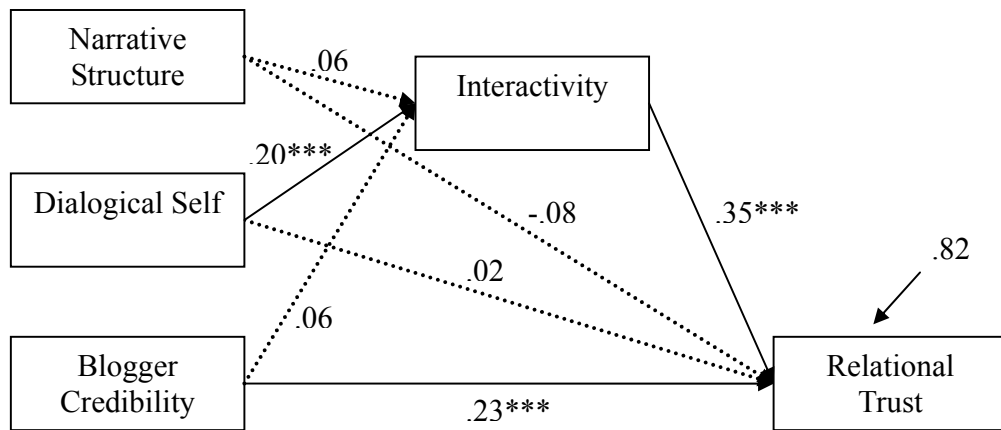


Figure 1. Results of path model analysis for the blog-mediated public relations (BMPR) model.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Appendix: Experimental Stimuli of Sample Blog Posts

*1. Blogger Credibility*

*High blogger credibility:*

(...) I have over twenty years of computer industry experience as an entrepreneur, corporate executive and independent consultant. My successful management consulting business teamed with clients such as Adobe Systems, Inc., CBS MarketWatch, Hewlett-Packard, Intuit, Palm, and Handspring. (...)

*Low blogger credibility:*

(...) I started my career after my gossip blog *Kudobrity* became a moderate success among celebrity gossip blogs. (...) After two years of trolling the Web for dirt about celebrities and media stars, I became a freelance celebrity publicist working for various B-list celebrities. (...)

*2. Narrative Structure*

*High narrative structure:*

(...) Last night, my husband came to me and asked me to “take a look” at our kids’ computer, which has been a bit “sluggish.” I knew where that was heading. With the last episode of *Gray’s Anatomy* to watch on DVD, I procrastinated—why do today what I can tackle tomorrow? (...) Good thing, because as luck would have it, I came across Matthew Miller’s blog review of E-Doctor Anti Virus for *Intelli-Q*. Not only did this cool, portable spyware removal program save me hours of anguish and headaches, I may have found my new favorite use for my *Intelli-Q*

drive—portable IT assistant! (...)

*Low narrative structure:*

(...) ParetoLogic launched E-Doctor Anti Virus for *Intelli-Q* platform USB drives. So people can now take along the SanDisk Cruzer Titanium *Intelli-Q* USB flash drive, pop it into a USB port, and scan and clean the PCs they are working on with a couple of simple clicks. (...)

3. *Dialogical Self*

*High dialogical self:*

After my first post, some readers have left comments about the issue of system compatibility. Others also emailed me and echoed similar concerns. (...) To be honest, before I started using an *Intelli-Q* Smart Drive, I had never seriously considered running any of the open source or less costly alternatives to Microsoft Office. (...) What's your take on using open source office applications? Am I nuts here?

*Low dialogical self:*

(...) If you have other questions about using your *Intelli-Q* smart drive, please visit the support area of our website to check our FAQs, ask a question of the knowledge base or submit a query to customer support. Note that this is a moderated blog and we reserve the right to edit messages before displaying any post. We will remove or edit messages containing objectionable material as quickly as possible. (...)