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Organizational Image Construction in a Fragmented Online Media Environment

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This article examines the role of different online and social media channels in constructing organizational image. Bimodal network analysis was used to examine 6 months of self-presentation by natural supermarket chain Whole Foods through its online press room, blog, and microblogging account. The channels converged on a core set of terms, and overlapped in others, but each channel also addressed divergent aspects of the organization's projected image. This study suggests that the structural and social characteristics of these channels give them varying roles in the image construction process, creating new challenges for the public relations function in coordinating image management among various new media.

Organizations seek to influence their reputation through a variety of self-presentation activities, which collectively express the organization's identity and promote a particular image. Today's online media environment allows room for organizations to post traditional news releases, and social media such as blogging and microblogging (Twitter) also contribute to image building. This study set out to examine whether and in what ways different online media channels contribute differentially to organizations' projected image. Bimodal social and semantic network analysis was used to examine 6 months of self-presentation by the natural supermarket chain Whole Foods through the company's online news releases, corporate blog, and Twitter messages. The channels converged on a core set of terms, and

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overlapped in others, but each channel also addressed divergent aspects of the organization's projected image. This study suggests that the public relations function is facing new challenges in coordinating image management among various new media. This article focuses specifically on online image construction from a theory building perspective, with the aim of contributing to a more nuanced understanding of reputation useful to public relations scholars and practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous scholars have lamented the inconsistent use of the terms *image* and *reputation* in the organizational literature (Barnett, Jermier, & Lafferty, 2006; Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; King & Whetten, 2008). Despite various attempts at clarification and suggestions for a universal nomenclature, scholars continue to use the terms interchangeably and even in contradictory ways, both across and within disciplines (Barnett et al., 2006).

Synthesizing the range of definitions proposed, reputation can be broadly conceptualized as a combination of organizational self-presentation, representations by media and other third parties, and stakeholder perceptions. Traditional views of reputation present it as a resource to be strategically managed, especially through media output (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). Recent scholarship, however, has increasingly emphasized the inherently dynamic and unstable nature of reputation as a construct that must be constantly negotiated between organizations and stakeholders (Deephouse, 2000; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Murphy, 2010). Deephouse, in particular, highlighted the multiple, cumulative factors that contribute to media reputation, which he defined as a resource influenced by the organization and its stakeholders, as well as media producers and consumers. Most of these factors are out of the organization's control, to varying degrees (Gilpin & Murphy, forthcoming; Murphy, 2010).

Organizational image is one component of this complex set of factors, and one in which the organization is directly involved. Organizational image has been variously described as insiders' perceptions of how outsiders view the organization (Dhalla, 2007; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; LaBianca, Fairbank, Thomas, Gioia, & Umphress, 2001); the projected veneer of an organization (Bromley, 2000); stakeholder perceptions of an organization (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997; Illia & Lurati, 2006); and as an umbrella term encompassing all reputational aspects of an organization (Wartick, 2002). Brown et al. (2006) described image as the combination of *intended image*, or the identity the organization seeks to project to stakeholders, and *construed image*, or the idea organizational members have of how external stakeholders view the organization. Regardless of the specific terminology applied, organizational image and reputation are closely intertwined, and represent a complex set of organizational expressions and assessments performed by stakeholders in relation to the organization and that help determine its perceived legitimacy (King & Whetten, 2008).

Within this model, *image construction* is seen as the self-presentation processes used to build and maintain a particular set of perceptions among stakeholders regarding the organization's identity. Identity in this context is a multidimensional construct that includes organizational self-perception, projections of this self-perception, and beliefs about others' views of the organization (Brown et al., 2006; Gilpin, 2008; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). The theoretical framework adopted here stipulates organizational identity as the internal component of the larger construct of reputation, and image as the outward expression of identity. Organizations thus seek to construct and project an image based on their perceived identity, in the hope of influencing overall reputation. They do so via a "collection of symbols" (Barnett et al., 2006, p. 34) that express an organization's identity to stakeholders.

Although image construction originates from an organization, it is an inherently social process, as the organization adapts and responds to feedback or changes in the stakeholder environment. An organization must establish its legitimacy with key stakeholders (King & Whetten, 2008), both through its material actions and through its communication efforts. Image construction is, therefore, the way in which organizations project aspects of their identity that they believe will contribute to this legitimacy (Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; van Riel & Balmer, 1997; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Wei (1999) specifically emphasized the social nature of image construction: As an organization seeks to form relationships with stakeholders, it must tailor its self-expressions to satisfy collective expectations. To complicate matters further, these expectations are likely to vary among stakeholder groups; Christensen and Askegaard (2001) noted the difficulty of reconciling various image presentations of an organization "without maintaining rigid and problematic distinctions" among audiences (p. 293). Expectations and needs of stakeholder groups also vary over time. The task of reconciling different identity conceptions, and expressing them to various stakeholders as appropriate, typically falls to the public relations practitioner.

THE ROLE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN IMAGE CONSTRUCTION

The expressions that make up organizational image are negotiated and disseminated as "a function of public relations, marketing and other organizational processes that attempt to shape the impression people have of the firm" (Barnett et al., 2006, p. 34). Public relations is also the organizational area usually responsible for forging and maintaining stakeholder relationships (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). The traditional public relations tool used to construct organizational identity and communicate image narratives to the media has been the news release (Gilpin, 2008). Unlike many other traditional forms of organizational communication, news releases are relatively inexpensive to produce and are issued frequently, to update stakeholders on organizational events, and to reinforce image expressions through legitimating third-party media. Today's online media environment, however, offers other low-cost means of reaching constituents; many of these offer the added advantage of bypassing the mainstream media and allowing organizations to engage directly with stakeholders.

Two widely used means of online image construction and relationship building are blogs and microblogging services. *Blogs*, or Web logs, consist of a chronologically arranged series of articles, usually allow reader comments, and often use tags to permit topical searching. Readers can typically subscribe to receive syndicated delivery of blog updates to an aggregator or directly to e-mail (Gordon, 2006). Although relatively little systematic research has been conducted on the public relations function of organizational blogs (Kent, 2008), there is some evidence that the direct communication and interaction offered by blogs can improve relationship strength as perceived by stakeholders (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Smudde (2005) suggested that blog interactions between stakeholders and organizations "should help stakeholders to identify with an organization and its messages, build community rapport, and maintain image, reputation, and credibility" (p. 38).

Microblogging is an even more recent phenomenon, consisting of short updates that can be posted online, broadcast through cell phone text messaging, or appear as status updates in a user's Facebook or instant messaging profile (Naone, 2008). The best known microblogging platform is currently the online service, Twitter. Twitter users can communicate publicly in messages of no more than 140 characters (known as *tweets*); tweets may be undirected or addressed to specific users. A number of companies have begun using Twitter to communicate directly with stakeholders; these include Comcast, Baskin-Robbins, JetBlue, and Zappos, among others (Tsai, 2008). Both blogging and microblogging are thus increasingly adopted as part of organizational reputation management strategies, and should be studied within that context.

IMAGE CONSTRUCTION IN A FRAGMENTED MEDIA CONTEXT

Most models of reputation, even those that include multiple elements and place them within a social context, are fairly linear. For example, in the model proposed by Brown et al. (2006), organizations project an agreed-upon image to stakeholders, and stakeholder perceptions represent the organization's reputation. However, this model assumes a world in which organizations communicate with one voice, and stakeholders have limited access to image-construction information beyond their own experiences with the organization and its representation in mainstream media.

Today's media environment is changing rapidly. Although most new and social media tools are forms of controlled media, they introduce new complicating factors into the media relations landscape for public relations practitioners. The fact that relationships are forged and conducted in public virtual spaces, often with input from multiple directions, can bring a new twist on public relations as "publicly relating" (Gilpin, 2010, p. 246). Social networking media form a different kind of network structure on the Internet, compared to traditional media or other kinds of Web pages, because there are many different types of participants who form many different types of relational and communication ties (Finin et al., 2008). Blogs or microblogging accounts may have multiple authors or multiple accounts may be associated with a single organization (see, for example, http://twitter.zappos.com/employees and http://blog.rubbermaid.com/). Managing multiple voices may, therefore, permit an organization to expand its network of stakeholder relations, but also presents new challenges to those responsible for image management.

Additionally, the boundary between new and traditional media is blurring: Newspapers and magazines increasingly monitor blogs, Twitter, and other new media sources for story information, and use the same tools to communicate with readers (Robinson, 2007; Storm, 2007). News releases are frequently available directly to stakeholders through online press rooms and other electronic forms of distribution. In light of these complicating factors, there is a need to develop theories of image construction and reputation that take into account both the fragmented online media universe and its associated complex social dimensions. This article uses network analysis to examine the online image construction patterns of one organization, the natural supermarket chain Whole Foods, and seeks to identify avenues for further research to continue to enhance understanding of image and reputation in today's mediascape.

STUDY

To investigate this model, this study examined the online image construction practices of the natural foods retail chain Whole Foods for a 6-month period in 2008. The economic crisis came into sharp relief in the United States during this time, with the collapse of several large lenders and the rapid passage of congressional rescue funding ("The Wachovia Bailout," 2009). The retail sector has suffered in particular from the recession and struggling economy (Pollack et al., 2008). Although food is not, in and of itself, a luxury, Whole Foods is a supermarket chain that specializes in high quality natural, organic, and locally grown products. Its higher prices have earned the chain the colloquial nickname of "Whole Paycheck" (Fromartz, 2006, p. 247). Thus, the time period selected, although free of any major internal crises to disrupt the normal pattern of communication, allowed a glimpse of the image-management strategies of an upscale food retailer during the early stages of the economic recession. Additionally, the company—which already had an online Press Room, with news releases available for download, and a corporate blog—also created a Twitter account in June 2008, immediately prior to the period studied. Many companies are turning to social media as lower-cost alternatives to traditional communication channels, and in an attempt to reach new stakeholders in an uncertain economic climate (Marketing Sherpa, 2009). Whole Foods, therefore, represents a useful case study for examining emerging image construction processes through a combination of new and traditional communication channels represented online.

Given the complexity of this fragmented media environment, and the interdependent model of image construction previously described, this study set out to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the key themes in Whole Foods' self-constructed image online, as evidenced in the source data?

RQ2: To what extent, and in what ways, does each of the online channels investigated (press room, blog, Twitter) contribute to image construction?

The answers to these questions can provide valuable indications concerning whether, and in what ways, different online communication channels perform different image construction functions, and thus ultimately play different roles in the image management process.

Data

The data used for the study included the news releases, blog posts, and Twitter messages issued by Whole Foods during the period studied, from July 1 through December 31, 2008. This time period provides coverage of two financial quarters, an important unit of measure for publicly traded companies. During this time, the company issued 45 news releases; posted to the corporate blog, "Whole Story," 207 times; and delivered 763 tweets, or 140-character messages.[1] All data were formatted into plain text files and sorted by source and date. Because the method of analysis requires text, audio and video files were excluded from the analysis. To simplify the analysis, text files were processed in the aggregate by source. Grouping the files this way made it possible to produce a cumulative representation of themes associated with sources in the textual analysis process.

Methods

Network analysis is a set of methodologies that examine patterns of relationships among elements (Monge & Contractor, 2003; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). There are two fundamental types of network analysis: social and semantic. Social network analysis techniques identify the key players in the network, the relationships among them, and patterns of change. Social structures, however, cannot give a complete picture of any domain on their own. It is only through understanding the content of information and relational exchanges between actors that one can fully understand a given network domain (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Mische & White, 1998). Using a combination of social and semantic network analysis methods can, therefore, provide a richer portrait of communication phenomena.

Semantic network analysis applies network concepts to textual data, to identify influential terms, conceptual groupings, and other relational patterns within texts. Methods of semantic network analysis, in particular centering resonance analysis (CRA), offer a promising means of processing large amounts of textual data. This technique uses natural language parsing to locate nouns and noun phrases in natural English texts or sets of texts (Corman, Kuhn, McPhee, & Dooley, 2002). It then uses network computations to identify the most influential terms. Relative influence is

[1]Despite the seemingly vast disparity in volume between the channels, it is worth noting that the brevity of tweets means that the actual amount of text generated is equivalent to approximately 71 double-spaced printed pages, and thus not overwhelmingly greater than the other two channels studied.

calculated based on the *betweenness centrality* of terms, or the extent to which they represent the shortest path between other pairs of actors in the network (Monge & Contractor, 2003; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The advanced natural language processing capabilities and use of centrality measures move CRA beyond those computerized methods that rely simply on lexical frequency counts, and eliminate the need for the researcher to input prepared dictionaries. In this way, CRA reduces the risk of instrumental or researcher bias compared to some traditional content analysis methods. Corman et al. (2002) suggested that this technique is potentially useful in media analysis because it can identify the most salient points of any set of recorded rhetorical acts, from news stories to transcripts. This type of analysis is, therefore, particularly well suited to the study of large bodies of text gathered over time. Furthermore, identification of highly central terms "denotes the author's intentional acts regarding word choice and message meaning, reflecting the strategy behind the discourse" (Oliveira & Murphy, 2009, p. 368). This capability makes CRA especially suited for the study of image construction strategies.

The software package used for this analysis is Crawdad, by Crawdad Technologies (Corman & Dooley, 2006). For this study, CRA was performed on the three sets of data files for Whole Foods—Twitter messages, blog posts, and news releases. This analysis identified the most influential, or central, terms in each document as described. Those terms with a betweenness centrality greater than .01 and appearing in at least two documents of a given group were exported into a new data file, which was then subjected to factor analysis using SPSS. The results of the factor analysis are presented in the next section.

In addition to identifying the key influential terms in Whole Foods' image construction documents, another important aim of this study was to identify which channels contributed to the organization's online image construction, and in what ways. For this step, it was necessary to employ a bimodal social network analysis, which shifts emphasis from connections *among* actors to connections *between* two different categories of actors (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In this case, therefore, the procedure shows how semantic terms are linked to the specific channels in which they were found to be influential, to identify image construction patterns of each channel, both singularly and combined. Crawdad performs only a limited number of network functions, so the influential terms identified by Crawded for each channel were thus entered into another software package for these analyses, Pajek (de Nooy, Mrvar, & Batagelj, 2005). Pajek is designed to handle large network datasets (Freeman, 2000), which is often useful for semantic networks, because even modest textual datasets can produce networks of thousands or even millions of words. The data graph imported from Crawdad was *directed* in the sense that all ties, or *arcs* (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), extended from one of the three communication channels (blog, online press room, or Twitter) to a term influential in that channel according to the CRA. A partition, or set of nominal categories (de Nooy et al., 2005) was also created indicating which channel, or combination of channels, was associated with each influential term.

Findings

RQ1 focused on the image promoted by Whole Foods through online media. The 300 terms with the highest betweenness centrality and appearing in at least two documents were exported from Crawdad for analysis in SPSS. The number was chosen based on the recommendation of Comrey and Lee (1992), who suggested that 300 cases is a good threshold for factor analysis. Although recent trends in communication research favor exploratory factor analysis (EFA) over the more commonly adopted principal components analysis (PCA), (Conway & Huffcutt, 2003; Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999; Park, Dailey, & Lemus, 2002), correlation matrices from textual analysis such as CRA do not lend themselves well to this technique, given the high correlations among numerous terms that typically produce a nonpositive matrix. The terms were thus subjected to PCA, along with Promax rotation (with Kaiser normalization), an oblique method that permits factors to be correlated (Osborne & Costello, 2005). Because it is reasonable to believe that Whole Foods does not seek to present wholly discrete aspects of itself to stakeholders, it is more theoretically sound to permit correlation between factors.

The aforementioned analysis produced 2 factors, which together accounted for 100% of the variance (63.73% for Factor 1, and 36.27% for Factor 2); the two factors had a very low correlation of .125. Because semantic terms tend to be closely linked, there are a large number of terms with high load values. Table 1, therefore, shows only the partial results of the factor analysis. The terms listed are those that loaded at .9 and above; specific load values have been omitted in the interest of space.

The factors are labeled through the lens of recent literature on identity, which has shifted away from the classic attribute model that focused on the central, enduring, and distinctive aspects of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Scholars are increasingly approaching identity as a fluid, dialogic process instead (Gioia et al., 2000; Somers, 1994; Wiley, 1994). Although it is impossible to determine intent through textual analysis alone, especially when the texts are produced by multiple voices within

TABLE 1
Factor Analysis of Core Semantic Terms

Factor name	*Highest-loading terms in factor*		
1 Core identity	product	economic	crab
	kitchen	member	traditional
	state	easy	producer
	trade	shrimp	sale
	German	quality	former
	produce	available	aura
	San Francisco	environmental	supermarket
	business	center	recycled
	market	marine	Whole Foods Market
	care	high	exclusive
	environment	working	meal
	country	nation	company
	sustainable	garlic	percent
	program	organic	cooking
	fish	butter	waste
	natural	result	organization
	California	director	agriculture
	support	partner	Washington
	department	seafood	Oktoberfest
	case	American	board
	farm	agency	family
	steak	sausage	salmon
	price	CIW	national
	grocery	process	shopper
1 Narrative identity	use	plant	hand
	community	sweet	crop
	fruit	woman	old
	low	budget	water
	harvest	part	healthy
	long	project	great
	safe	vegetable	meat
	variety	honey	salad
	small	year	line
	life	skin	pumpkin
	kid	body	potato
	land	region	story
	area	red	season
	dish	full	bean
	olive	fair	grower
	light		Oil

the organization that may or may not be centrally coordinated, self-presentation texts do provide an opportunity to examine how the organization cumulatively chooses to express its identity. If organizational image is viewed as the expression of identity, as described previously, then it is reasonable to draw conclusions about identity based on the themes that predominate in this expression.

The first image factor has thus been labeled *core identity*, because it is the largest component and, therefore, presumably represents the primary expression of organizational identity by those responsible for constructing and maintaining Whole Foods' online image. These terms emphasize the institutional aspects of Whole Foods (*Whole Foods Market, company, department, trade*) and the organic foods sector in general (*producer, organic, sustainable, natural, farm*). Although there are some specific foods included among these terms (*steak, salmon, crab*), they are largely the kind for which organic production standards have been fiercely debated. For example, issues of appropriate pasture time for organically approved livestock (Pulaski, 2006) and the problems of controlling organic processes in salmon fisheries (Fromartz, 2007) have been the focus of discussion among consumers, producers, and policy makers in recent years. The core identity also highlights the local aspect of Whole Foods' business by naming specific locations (*San Francisco, California*), as well as the expansiveness of its operations (*American, national*). Other words are positive associations with home and tradition (*family, traditional, meal, kitchen*); others express the tension between luxury and cost-consciousness (*economic, price, sale, exclusive, quality, member*). All in all, the core image presents Whole Foods as a welcoming source of natural and organic products for families who value quality. This factor accounts for just under two-thirds of the total variance (63.73%).

The second image factor, labeled *narrative identity*, accounts for the remaining portion of the variance (36.27%). This factor generally focuses on the well-being of consumers (*body, healthy, safe, skin*)—including specific types of consumers (*woman, kid*)—as well as global identity (*community, project*). It also refers to certain commodities (*chicken, potato, olive*). The most interesting aspect of this factor, reflected in the name, is the sense of narrative it contains, both through inclusion of the word *story* and words that paint an idyllic agrarian portrait (*honey, grower, season, old, water, sweet, harvest*). The name also reflects the idea that these are the more fluid aspects of the organization's expressed identity, which are less predominant in the texts than the core identity, and thus more potentially subject to change through dialogue with stakeholders (Somers, 1994). The possible implications of these factors and of the other findings are discussed in the following.

RQ2 addressed the ways in which the different communication channels contributed to the company's constructed image. The CRA identified 353 influential terms, which gives a betweenness centrality of over .01

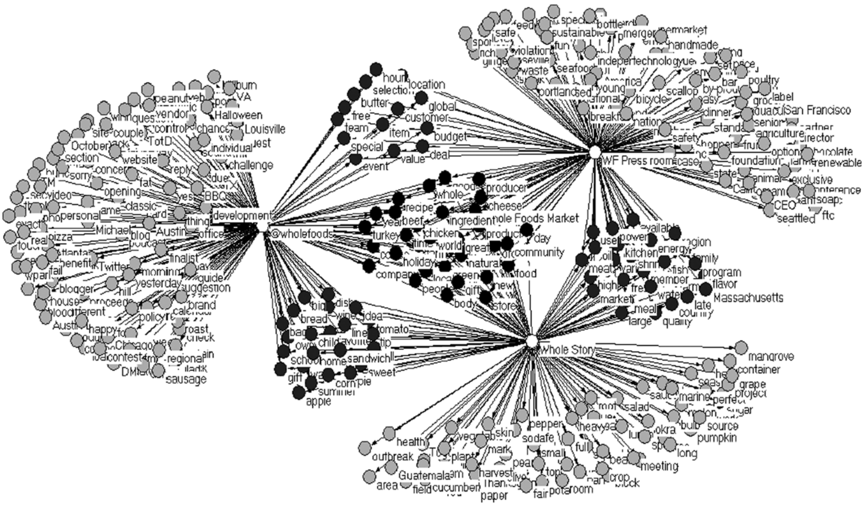

FIGURE 1 Two-mode network of channels and terms.

as described previous. The semantic network analysis produced a clearly recognizable pattern of differentiated media use. Figure 1 shows the distribution of the semantic network analyzed. Each node in the network represents either a communication channel or an individual term. The three white nodes represent the three channels: blog, Twitter account, and online press room. The black nodes in the center of the diagram correspond to those terms found to be influential in all three channels. These are surrounded by a ring of dark gray terms, shared by two of the three channels. Finally, the outer groups of nodes signify those terms attached to a single communication channel.

The diagram, therefore, does not show the connections between lexical terms, although those connections are included in the CRA. Discussion of those connections falls outside the scope of this article, which focuses on which terms are most influential in the online construction of Whole Foods' image, and on how each of the three channels in question contributed to that construction process.

To that end, in addressing RQ2, Table 2 lists the distribution of terms within the semantic network. The three channels fully overlap for 31 influential terms, referred to here as the *core*, representing just under 9% of the total terms in the network. A combined total of slightly less than 18% of the total terms are influential in two of the channels, leaving the vast majority of terms to specific channels.

TABLE 2
Distribution of Terms in the Semantic Network

Distribution	*No. of terms*	*% of terms*
Core	31	8.78
2nd tier shared: Blog-Twitter	23	6.52
2nd tier shared: Twitter-press room	14	3.97
2nd tier shared: Press room-blog	26	7.37
Press room only	85	24.08
Blog only	64	18.13
Twitter only	110	31.16
Total	353	100

These results indicate a high level of message differentiation among the different communication channels, suggesting that each plays a distinct role in constructing the organization's image. The data in Table 3, summarizing the quantitative features of the semantic network, reinforce this conclusion.

As mentioned previously, the arcs in the network diagram are directional, from each channel to its associated influential terms. For each channel, Table 3, therefore, shows the *centrality*, or total number of arcs (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), as well as the proportion of shared terms and those specific to that channel. The table shows that the Whole Foods Twitter account had the highest overall degree centrality, and had the largest percentage of linked terms that qualified as influential (based on their betweenness centrality value) solely in that communication channel. The Whole Story blog and news releases were more evenly divided, with around half of their terms belonging to the core identity, and half specific to each channel.

TABLE 3
Semantic Network Data Per Communication Channel

Communication channel	*Outdegree centrality*[a]	*% Shared influential terms*	*% Channel-specific influential terms*
News releases	156	45.51 core = 19.87 2nd tier shared = 25.64	54.49
Blog	144	55.56 core = 21.52 2nd tier shared = 22.91	44.44
Twitter	178	38.20 core = 17.43 2nd tier shared = 16.29	61.79

[a]Total number of linked influential terms.

TABLE 4
Most Influential Semantic Terms in Each Communication Channel

Press room	*Blog*	*Twitter*
standard	pumpkin	today
seafood	small	TotD
FTC	season	thanks
salmon	sugar	check
shopper	part	blog
enhanced	Thanksgiving	post
California	red	page
aquaculture	healthy	card
ginger	olive	tweet
partner	vegetable	info
environmental	tree	thought
San Francisco	area	folk
America	bean	service
chocolate	soup	podcast
scallop	potato	Austin
percent	pear	awesome
crab	root	secret
dinner	salad	Tweetdeck
baby	life	feedback
easy	pepper	classic

Note. TotD = Tweet of the Day. FTC = Federal Trade Commission.

As so many of the terms in the semantic network were found to be influential within a single channel, those channel-specific terms were ranked by total betweenness centrality (influence value). The results of this analysis are shown in Table 4, which lists the 20 most influential terms for each channel in decreasing order. Network values are difficult to compare in any meaningful way, because they are highly dependent on specific context (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003), so the values for each term have been omitted from the table for the sake of simplicity.

DISCUSSION

The network diagram shown in Figure 1 shows a strong degree of differentiation among the different communication channels employed by Whole Foods to construct its public image online. At the same time, it also shows a common core of terms found to be influential in all of the channels, suggesting that Whole Foods has a strong central identity

(Wei, 1999) that it communicates across online media. At the same time, it develops additional themes, or different facets of those core themes, through the various channels it uses to communicate with stakeholders. Although all three channels examined are official, in the sense that they are operated by the company, they vary in the degree to which stakeholders drive content. The organizational image, or online social expression of Whole Foods' identity, therefore takes somewhat different forms in different media.

The answer to RQ1, which asks to identify the key themes in Whole Foods' online image, is explored primarily through the factor analysis (Table 1). The largest proportion of terms found in Whole Foods' core image communications has to do with reinforcing its corporate identity as a purveyor of natural, locally grown and produced foods. The company has gained a national reputation as a source of quality natural products, although it has also been associated by some with high prices and yuppie lifestyle values (Fromartz, 2006). Whole Foods has also been a visible proponent of sustainable food practices and reliance on local food sources (Frazier, 2007; York, 2008). Terms such as *organic, producer, green, farm, good,* and *producer* form the main themes of this core factor. The other key aspect of the organization's identity is represented in the second factor, with an emphasis on global interdependency (*community, world, coffee*) and consumer well-being (*body*). Although Whole Foods clearly presents these themes as positive aspects of its organizational image, critics have noted that sourcing foods internationally and promoting conspicuous consumption are at odds with the company's talk of sustainability (Fromartz, 2007; Pollan, 2006). These two facets of the company's image are, therefore, constructed as complementary, but also represent tensions that are difficult to reconcile through online messages alone.

RQ2 asked which channels contributed to the online image of the company, and in what ways. News releases had a total outdegree centrality of 156, almost 20% of which consisted of core terms (Table 3). Given that the content of news releases is fully controlled by the organization, even those terms that do not fall within the central core can be assumed to be strategically chosen to express desired facets of the organization's image online.

The most social of the media channels examined, Twitter, contributed least to the core overall: Of the three media channels, it is the most intrinsically dialogic. In other words, it is the online medium that lends itself most to the characteristics of dialogic public relations as put forth by Kent and Taylor (2002), particularly *mutuality, propinquity*, and *risk*. In terms of mutuality, Twitter conversations are peer to peer, and take place in a shared space that does not belong to any particular user. This arrangement also creates a situation of propinquity, where exchanges are immediate and take place within a stream of ongoing communication. Finally, the immediacy, mutuality, and public nature of Twitter make it a risky venue for organizations who are unwilling to engage in real-time public dialogue with stakeholders, or who fear missteps. For example, a Ketchum employee was recently dismissed after using Twitter to complain about the city of Memphis, where he had been dispatched to work with a client on developing a social media presence (Shankman, 2009).

Twitter can be used as a simple broadcasting medium, but is also a means for engaging in conversation directly with constituents. Examples of general messages broadcast by Whole Foods during the period examined include, "Christina Minardi (our Northeast Regional President) will ring the NASDAQ opening bell on Monday, July 7th" (posted on July 4), and "Did you know that not all sugar is vegan? Read more about our vegan cane sugar: http://tinyurl.com/5duoav" (posted on September 16). The Twitter convention involves using the "@" symbol before a person's username to address them directly or respond to a question or comment. Whole Foods often replies to questions about the availability of certain products ("It is blood orange season, but you'll have to check with the store to see if they're currently being carried in your store," December 5), or finding a local store ("These are the stores we're planning for Cali in the next couple years or so ... http://is.gd/dlB," August 21). Thus, even though the study only examined the content of Whole Foods' own tweets, and not those of interlocutors, their content was strongly influenced by questions and topics posed by others.

Although blogs typically allow space for reader comments, this study focused on self-presentation and, therefore, did not include comments in the analysis. Even when taking comments into account, however, blogs are inherently more asymmetrical than Twitter. Although Kent (2008) recently suggested that the presence of open, threaded comments on blogs makes them a dialogic medium for discussion among interested stakeholders, most blogs have a single author (or a limited number of authors). Discussions take place in the space that is created by the author of the post, and the content of the post is generally the starting point for those discussions. The blog author therefore occupies a privileged position in shaping the ensuing discussion, whether or not this privilege is leveraged in practice. The difference in content control between blogs and Twitter is supported by the findings in this study. As Table 3 indicates, the percentage of shared and channel-specific terms expressed in the news releases and the corporate blog were virtually identical, but with the proportions reversed: Only 44% of the influential terms expressed through the blog were unique to that medium, the lowest of all the channels. Twitter, on the other hand, had the highest number of channel-specific influential terms, at nearly 62%, a total of 110 terms (Table 2).

The distinctions between channels are especially clear when examining the most influential terms specific to each, as shown in Table 4. The news releases, distributed to mainstream media channels for coverage, emphasize newsworthy issues regarding federal and state standards for food safety and organic certification (*standard, aquaculture, California, environmental*). News releases also addressed conflicts between Whole Foods and the Federal Trade Commission (*FTC*) over antitrust issues related to the company's purchase of competing natural foods retail chain Wild Oats ("Whole Foods Market Files Comments on Proposed FTC Regulations as 'Unfair, Bad Policy and Radical Departure from Due Process Principles'; Announces Formation of 'Ad Hoc Committee for FTC Fair Play,'" October 27; "Whole Foods Market® Challenges FTC in D.C. Federal Court," December 8). Terms such as *salmon* and *seafood* were also related to news ("Whole Foods Market Introduces Enhanced Farmed Seafood Standards," July 16), but were also found in more consumer-interest news releases that published recipes and announced seasonal changes in store inventory ("Affordable, Easy, Everyday Seafood at Whole Foods Market Helps Families Get Their Weekday Groove On," September 15; "Whole Foods Market Features Festive Seafood Options for Easy Entertaining on a Holiday Budget," December 1). All of these terms, although not found in the core, support and enhance the central online image of the organization as expressed through the two factors in Table 1: core identity, on the one hand, and narrative identity, on the other.

The key terms specific to the blog, on the other hand, are almost entirely related to recipes and product-based information. Given that blogs are used to communicate directly with stakeholders, the concept of newsworthiness from a journalistic perspective is no longer a driving factor in deciding content. Both regular readers of the Whole Foods blog and those who find the site by searching for recipe information can find useful information about selecting and using seasonal produce, as well as general advice about maintaining a healthful diet and lifestyle. Examples of posts containing some of the most influential blog terms listed in Table 4 include "The Mystery of the Pumpkin" (October 31), a post about the versatility and history of squash, along with a recipe for curried pumpkin soup; "The Refractometer" (September 23), a post explaining how the retailer measures the sweetness and relative ripeness of fruit; and "Healthy Aging - Interview with Dr. Andrew Weil" (September 30), a post with an embedded podcast interview (not included in the analysis) containing tips on vitamins, antioxidants, and the cautious use of supplements to promote health and longevity. The nature of blog posts is therefore primarily focused on consumer interests. As previously noted, most of these terms also support the core online image of the organization while expanding on it in ways that would be out of place in a news release.

Finally, the central terms specific to Twitter expand the image even further, and open up new areas of dialogue. The overall tone is even more informal than that of the blog, with colloquialisms and abbreviations that make it easier to remain within the 140-character limit (*awesome, folk, info*). There are also some terms that reflect jargon specific to Twitter (*tweet*) and the tools most commonly adopted by users (*Tweetdeck*, a software application for managing Twitter subscriptions). The abbreviation *TotD* stands for "Tweet of the Day," an occasional promotion that rewarded the author of a favorite Whole Foods-related message with a store gift card (*card*). The company also used its Twitter account to announce the publication of blog posts and multimedia, and direct people to information resources on its main Web site, to drive traffic to the site (*blog, post, page, podcast*). Many of the terms, however, focus directly on dialogue between Whole Foods and individual stakeholders, and the ability to deliver online customer service: *thanks, feedback, service, check* ("Good question - I'm checking in with some people in our other regions and I'll get back to you ASAP!" August 5). These terms express an image of the organization as one that emphasizes personal interaction and attention. Although these terms are not included in the core, they nonetheless reinforce the image of a company interested in the overall well-being of consumers. Furthermore, they do so in a way that would not be possible in the other communication channels for structural reasons.

Beyond the specifics of Whole Foods and its online media use, the findings of this study carry implied ramifications for both practitioners and scholars of public relations, and organizational reputation in particular. The findings illustrate that different online and social media channels can and are being used to construct an organization's image online from a range of perspectives, to both reach and interact with multiple stakeholder groups. These groups, furthermore, are not mutually exclusive: Both the overlap in content and cross-referencing of different communication channels encourage online stakeholders to experience multiple permutations of the image expressed.

These findings suggest that it is time to develop more nuanced models of image construction, that take into account both the fragmented nature of today's online media environment and the multiple players who contribute to an organization's reputation in this venue. This article represents an initial step toward exploring the ways in which organizations are adapting to the increasingly social nature of the online "reputation space," the general domain in which organizational self-presentations, media representations, stakeholder experiences, and perceptions intermingle (Deephouse, 2000).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study examined 6 months of Whole Foods' electronic self-presentation through its press releases, blog posts, and Twitter messages. These vehicles represent the primary means by which the company constructs its self-image online. Many of the blog posts, however, contained multimedia files such as video or podcasts, which were not included in the study due to the unavailability of transcripts. Because the analytical methods used in this study focused on textual analysis, nontext materials were necessarily excluded. This exclusion does potentially limit the accuracy of the blog data.

Furthermore, this study focused primarily on the organization's own projected image. Given the inherently social nature of image construction and reputation, including blog comments and tweets addressed to Whole Foods would give a richer picture of the company's online image construction activities during the period examined. More in-depth exploration of clusters of associated terms, rather than individual terms as in this study, would contribute to a more nuanced description of the company's image. Longitudinal studies can also indicate whether the patterns identified are relatively stable, or whether they change over time in response to stakeholder responses, internal or external crisis situations, or the emergence of new forms of online and mobile communication. Finally, expanding the source data to include media representations of Whole Foods would give a more complete overview of the organization's reputation context, helping to identify the degree of influence the organization has been able to exercise through its online image construction efforts. All of these aspects were set aside in this study, which focused on examining the role of various online media channels in constructing the organization's image, and how theories of image construction might be adapted to incorporate these roles.

Although Whole Foods represents a useful focus for this initial exploration of image construction processes online, more research is also needed to determine whether other organizations who use multiple new media channels follow similar patterns of use. Examining various types of organizations—from different economic sectors, nonprofit as well as for-profit organizations, those communicating primarily with local, regional, national, or even international stakeholders—may provide further distinctions among online media channels.

CONCLUSION

The research described here contributes to the study and practice of public relations in two ways. From a practical perspective, this study highlights the ways in which using multiple online channels for image construction can reinforce core concepts yet also allow public relations practitioners to paint a richer portrait of the organization through dialogue. Social media tools such as blogs and, especially, microblogging pose challenges to practitioners who are used to the more controlled medium of the news release. However, they also represent opportunities to interact directly with stakeholders, and take cues from them on which aspects of the organization's image are most of interest. Whole Foods has used various media to emphasize different dimensions of the organization's identity and relate directly with consumers and other publics online. As a result, it has expanded the range of its organizational image, broadening its potential appeal to consumers who use a variety of digital communication platforms. The multitiered, overlapping patterns of image construction also suggest that today's communication media should be viewed along a continuum of relative degrees of organizational control, rather than according to the standard binary classification of controlled and uncontrolled media.

Conceptually, this article builds on a model of reputation similar to the one described by Brown et al. (2006), in which image construction represents the social dimension of organizational identity. The changing nature of the mediascape requires public relations theory and practice to adapt accordingly, particularly to account for the increasingly interactive and public nature of relationship building in online media. The findings of this study support recent trends in reputation research that shift the locus of control for reputation away from the organization (Deephouse, 2000; Gotsi & Wilson, 2001; Murphy, 2010). Focusing on the image construction themes expressed directly by the organization in different online media channels highlights the social nature of the image-building process. More dialogic channels show a higher degree of differentiation from the core set of terms, indicating responses to stakeholder input. This interactivity suggests that organizational image should be viewed as a complex construct built around a core set of themes that define the most central characteristics, values, and messages the organization wishes to express. These themes can then be elaborated differently according to the type of medium, but the organization must be prepared to adjust its image flexibly and rapidly when working in highly interactive modes such as microblogging, where stakeholders have more power to drive the direction of the conversation, compared to more controlled online formats such as news releases or blogging.

Here, reputation, as a whole, is seen as a system consisting of a mixed social and semantic network. Approaching reputation in this manner leads to a focus on connections, as well as content, which shifts the emphasis to examining the channels of communication, as well as the various publics who participate in the reputation network. Although this study focused more narrowly on the differentiated use of online media in image construction, conceptualizing reputation as a networked system can lead to new avenues of research to investigate the linkages between reputational themes, narratives, organizations, and publics. Given the increasing fragmentation of the media landscape, an understanding of these linkages is becoming crucial for anyone seeking to understand the social dimensions of organizational image construction, and build theories of reputation that take variegated media use into account.

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