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How Do Businesses Legitimize Artificial Intelligence (AI)? Ethical AI in Fortune 500 Companies' Ethics Statements *Baylor University Department of Journalism, Public Relations & New Media Top Ethics Paper Award* **Jiali Zhang**, University of Alabama, **Eyun-Jung Ki**, University of Alabama, **Qinxian Cai**, City University of Hong Kong This study adopts a legitimacy framework to examine ethics statements on artificial intelligence (AI) released by Fortune Global 500 companies. Quantitative content analysis is conducted to investigate how these statements legitimize ethical AI by aligning corporate AI practices with stakeholder expectations, establish ethical benchmarks, and deploy strategic legitimation cues.	***157***

Crisis Management for Reputation Protection: Exploring the Impact of the RAPIDS Model on Organizational Authenticity and Reputation during the KIA Challenge

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Abstract

This study aims to offer implications on crisis communication strategies that enhance organizational authenticity and protect organizational reputation through the RAPIDS model, a novel crisis management framework based on six principles, within the context of the Kia Challenge. The findings demonstrate that the RAPIDS model effectively enhances both organizational authenticity and reputation during a crisis, with authenticity acting as a mediator between the RAPIDS model and organizational reputation.

Keywords: *crisis communication, organizational authenticity, organizational reputation, and RAPIDS*

Crisis Management for Reputation Protection: Exploring the Impact of the RAPIDS Model on Organizational Authenticity and Reputation during the KIA Challenge

Crisis communication is critical for organizations to protect their reputation and reduce financial losses during unexpected challenges. Existing research in public relations has predominantly focused on crisis response strategies informed by symbolic-interpretive approaches, such as Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Page et al., 2023). However, as crises become increasingly complex and multifaceted, organizations face an urgent need for new frameworks to effectively address these evolving challenges (Manias-Muñoz et al., 2019).

In response to this need, the RAPIDS model has emerged from a strategic-behavioral perspective, emphasizing the importance of relational approaches and active public participation in problem-solving (Chon et al., 2022). The model is grounded in six core principles: Relationship, Accountability, Promptness, Inclusivity, Disclosure, and Symmetry (RAPIDS). By prioritizing these elements, the RAPIDS model seeks to provide a more dynamic and participatory approach to crisis communication, addressing the limitations of traditional frameworks.

This study explores how the RAPIDS model can be applied to enhance authenticity and preserve organizational reputation in times of crisis. It also examines authenticity's role as a mediator in mitigating reputational harm. To contextualize this exploration, the research focuses on the KIA Challenge—a viral trend on TikTok and YouTube that exposed a security vulnerability in certain Kia models manufactured before 2021. This incident, which triggered a nationwide spike in car thefts, underscores the pressing need for effective crisis communication strategies that prioritize relational engagement and public trust.

Context of study: KIA Challenge

The research context centers on the "Kia Challenge," a viral phenomenon on TikTok and YouTube that exposed a critical vulnerability in certain Kia and Hyundai vehicles, resulting in a nationwide surge in car thefts. The challenge demonstrated how to steal these vehicles by removing the plastic cowl under the steering column and using a USB cable to exploit the lack of an immobilizer system in models sold until 2021. This significant flaw in the ignition switch design not only facilitated widespread thefts but also garnered substantial media attention. The issue escalated to legal repercussions, with Kia and Hyundai agreeing to a $200 million settlement following a class-action lawsuit linked to the thefts inspired by the viral challenge. This case highlights the intersection of social media influence, product vulnerabilities, and corporate responsibility during crises, making it a compelling subject for exploring organizational responses and reputation management strategies.

Literature Review

Crisis Communication Research and RAPIDS model in Strategic-Behavioral Paradigm

Communication during organizational crises is a cornerstone of crisis management, as the exchange of crisis-related information among stakeholders influences public opinion, market sentiment, and individual decision-making (Sellnow & Seeger, 2021). Over the past few decades, crisis communication scholarship has expanded within the field of public relations, establishing itself as a key paradigm within the discipline (Manias-Muñoz et al., 2019; Toth, 2010). Most crisis communication research has focused on organizational image and message strategies (Liu Lastres, 2022). Image repair theory (IRT; Benoit, 1995) and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT; Coombs, 2007) are recognized as the two most influential frameworks in crisis communication research, providing strategies to mitigate reputational damage (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). IRT provides a framework of communication strategies for organizations facing crises, grounded in the premise that crisis communication aims to minimize reputation harm (Benoit, 1995). Building on IRT and attribution theory, SCCT outlines various crisis communication strategies and extends them by providing guidance on aligning these strategies with specific types of crises (Coombs, 2007). Using computational methods to analyze crisis communication scholarship in public relations articles from 2010 to 2020, Page and colleagues found that research on reputation using SCCT has grown significantly and remains more prevalent than studies employing IRT (Page et al., 2023).

While SCCT has provided valuable theoretical guidelines, scholars have highlighted several issues that need to be addressed in managing organizational crises (Chon et al., 2022; Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016; Page et al., 2023). Particularly, Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) noted a divide among scholar-practitioners in public relations regarding the application of SCCT to organizational crises, citing several reasons. Although SCCT suggests that the most effective crisis response strategy is to fully accept responsibility when attributions of responsibility are high, strategies such as bolstering and denial are more commonly employed by organizations in these situations (Kim et al., 2009). Next, practitioners argue that SCCT does not always meet practical needs and call for more tailored guidelines. Many professionals find theories, including SCCT, too theoretical and difficult to apply to the actual crisis situations they encounter. Importantly, a meta-analysis of SCCT revealed that attributed responsibility significantly and negatively impacted organizational reputation, whereas crisis response strategies had a positive but relatively weak influence on organizational reputation (Ma & Zhan, 2016). To address challenges in public relations, generally there are two primary approaches to use communication such as the symbolic-interpretive approach and the strategic-behavioral approach (Grunig, 1993, 2009). The symbolic-interpretive approach aims to shape how publics perceive and interpret organizational behaviors to deal with an organizational crisis, whereas the strategic-behavioral approach emphasizes managing organizational behaviors themselves, rather than merely changing how publics interpret the crisis (Kim et al., 2013). J. Gruing (2006; 2018) highlighted that the strategic-behavioral approach emerged from a research tradition that views public relations as a strategic management function, rather than merely a tool for messaging, publicity, or media relations, which aligns with the symbolic-interpretive paradigm. Currently, major crisis communication theories, such as IRT and SCCT, align with the symbolic interpretive approach in addressing organizational crises.

From the perspective of the strategic-behavioral approach, Chon and colleagues (2022) recently proposed six relationship- and action-focused principles—relationship, accountability, promptness, inclusivity, disclosure, and symmetry (RAPIDS). These principles highlight how organizations should address the need for problem-solving and foster connections with publics to build and sustain organization-public relationships before, during, and after a crisis. RAPIDS can be applied across various stages of a crisis, emphasizing the importance of a holistic understanding of crises and situating them within the broader historical context of organizational performance and relationships with involved actors (Chon et al., 2022). Four principles—relationship, accountability, disclosure, and symmetry—were initially proposed in a conceptual paper by Grunig (2011). Expanding on these, Chon and colleagues (2022) introduced two additional principles, promptness and inclusivity, and tested the reliability and validity of the RAPIDS model through three corporate crises involving Apple, Volkswagen, and Wells Fargo. Additionally, this RAPIDS study found that the RAPIDS principles enhance publics' willingness to forgive organizations (Chon et al., 2022). This model prioritizes the interests and relationships with affected publics (relationship principle), emphasizing the organization's responsibility for the crisis (accountability principle), providing information to support them (disclosure principle), addressing their needs as a priority (symmetry principle), delivering timely communication (promptness principle), and engaging affected publics in joint efforts to resolve the crisis (inclusivity principle). Practically, effective crisis management plans should be "simple" rather than overly complex, providing clear and concise guiding principles instead of a lengthy planning manual (Chon et al., 2022).

Authenticity

Scholars have highlighted the role of authenticity in relationship management (Brønn, 2010; Shen & Kim, 2012). Defined as the match between an organization's internal values and external presentations, authenticity is crucial for strong relationships with publics (Brønn, 2010). Additionally, as a driver of ethical principles, authenticity guides the organization's culture decision-making, further affecting its communication and ensuring trust from publics (Bowen et al., 2010). The organization that lacks authenticity recognized by publics would confront challenges in fostering an ethical culture and gaining credibility to build trust (Sims & Brinkman, 2013).

Authenticity, as a cognitive outcome, reflects publics' perceptions of the organization's actions and identity (Shen & Kim, 2012). Indeed, based on publics' knowledge about the organization derived from the interactions with the organization, they recognize characteristics of the organization (Shen & Kim, 2012). To wit, as a multidimensional factor, authenticity in an organizational setting was conceptualized as consisting of the following three components: truthfulness, transparency, and consistency (Shen & Kim, 2012). Truthfulness indicates the organization's behaviors should be genuine in relation to satisfying publics' and organizations' needs (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Shen & Kim, 2012). Regarding the components of transparency and consistency, the genuine identity of the organization needs to be transparently presented to publics, and the organization's authentic behaviors are in accord with its values and beliefs (Shen & Kim, 2012).

RAPIDS factors are likely connected to publics' perception of organizational authenticity, as RAPIDS signifies how the organizations conduct actions. While the association between RAPIDS and authenticity has not been fully explored, it was found that symmetrical communication was positively related to authenticity (Shen & Kim, 2012). Through symmetrical communication that enables engagement with informing publics and receiving feedback, the organization was perceived as true, transparent, and consistent (Shen & Kim, 2012).

Organizational Reputation

In a crisis event, organizational reputation, which refers to a collective evaluation of an organization's abilities, traits, and credibility based on its prior behaviors (Adamu et al., 2024; Coombs, 2007), is an important cognitive outcome that indicates the damages from the crisis (Coombs, 2019). A tarnished reputation is a primary threat from the crisis (Coombs, 2019). On the other hand, strongly favorable reputation may provide a buffer to the organization from negative reactions of publics (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000). In this light, it would be vital for the organization to maintain positive reputation. To do this, organizations need to appeal to publics by making efforts to keep consistent, transparent, and ethical practical approaches (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000). Through such actions, organizations may reap the merits of effective reputation management by ensuring organizational authenticity and trust from publics (Feldman et al., 2014; Fombrun & Rindova, 2000).

Scholars have treated organizational reputation as the outcome formed by how publics perceive the crisis event and the crisis-stricken organization (Coombs, 2019; Kim & Jin, 2020). Organizational reputation reflects publics' subjective reality rather than the objective one (Dukerich & Carter, 2000). By having direct and indirect interactions with the organization, publics are exposed to the information related to the organization, which leads to facets of reputation (Coombs, 2007, 2019). In the process of forming an organizational reputation, the inputs publics receive from their circumstances provide a cue for understanding the crisis situation and ultimately determines the evaluation of the organization (Coombs, 2019). As a representative example, crisis responsibility attributed to the organization determines the level and valence of reputation (Coombs, 2007). In a similar vein, the perception of authenticity likely affects the organizational reputation.

Given the established relationship between the RAPIDS model, organizational authenticity, and organizational reputation during a crisis, this study proposes the following research questions along with a conceptual model (See Figure 1):

RQ1: How do the principles of the RAPIDS model influence organizational authenticity during a crisis?

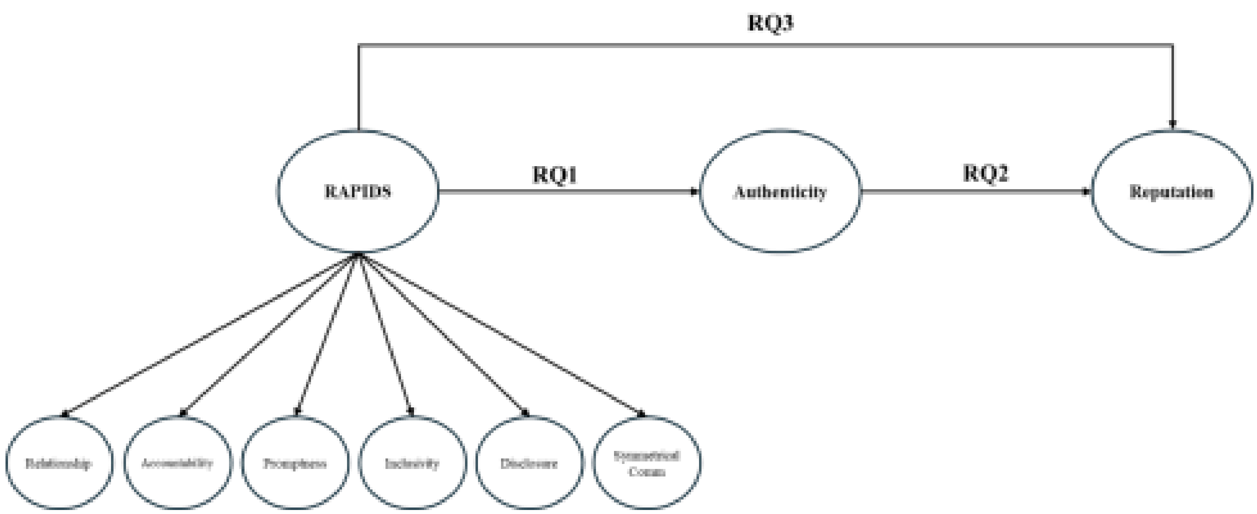
RQ2: How does organizational authenticity impact organizational reputation during a crisis?

RQ3: How do the principles of the RAPIDS model impact organizational reputation during a crisis?

RQ4: How does organizational authenticity mediate the relationship between the RAPIDS model and organizational reputation?

Figure 1

Proposed Model



Method

Participants and Procedure

After obtaining approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), an online survey was created using Qualtrics and distributed through Dynata, a survey panel provider. Respondents were required to read "the Kia Challenge" story. Also, respondents had to pass an attention check before proceeding with the full survey.

A total of 786 individuals participated. The sample was nearly evenly split by gender, with male respondents comprising 49.4% (n = 388) and female respondents 50.6% (n = 398). The average age of participants was 44.67 years. In terms of ethnicity, the majority identified as White/Caucasian (64.6%, n = 508), followed by African American (15.5%, n = 122), Hispanic (9.5%, n = 75), Asian (7.4%, n = 58), and other ethnicities (3.0%, n = 23). Educational attainment varied among respondents: 14.9% (n = 117) had completed high school or less, 31.3% (n = 246) held a two-year associate degree, 34.9% (n = 274) had earned a bachelor's degree, and 19.0% (n = 149) had a postgraduate degree. Regarding annual income, 24.8% (n = 195) reported earning $34,999 or less, 27.5% ($n$ = 216) earned between $35,000 and $74,999, 17.7% ($n$ = 139) earned $75,000 to $99,999, 16.8% ($n$ = 132) earned $100,000 to $124,999, and 13.2% ($n$ = 104) earned $150,000 or more.

Measures

All measurement items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Measurement items for RAPIDS's six principles including relationship, accountability, promptness, inclusivity, disclosure, symmetry was adapted from Chon et al., (2022). Eight items of relationship were originally adapted from Organization Public Relationship (OPR) Hon and Grunig (1999). Specifically, two items from four dimensions of OPR (control mutuality, satisfaction, trust, and commitment) were used to measure OPR (α = .954). Reliability of the other five principles were as follows: Accountability (α = .917), promptness (α = .930), inclusivity (α = .925), disclosure (α = .931), symmetry (α = .911)

Four items for organizational authenticity were adapted from Shen and Kim (2012) (α = .938). Finally, four items of organizational reputation were adapted from Coombs & Holladay (2002) (α = .943). Detailed item descriptions are shown in Table 1.

Analysis

The proposed model in this study was tested using structural equation modeling (SEM) with the AMOS 27 statistical package. In the first phase, a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted for all variables to identify and address low-loading items. In the second phase, the hypotheses were tested after confirming all items. Factor and item loadings for the model are reported in Table 2. Additionally, a second-order CFA was conducted to confirm the factor structure of RAPIDS, which includes relationship, accountability, promptness, inclusivity, disclosure, and symmetry. The standardized beta coefficients from the final model are also summarized in Table 2.

Table 1. Estimate, means, and standard deviations (SD).

Variable	Measurement	Mean	SD
RAPIDS Relationship	This organization and people like me are attentive to what the other says (Control mutuality).	4.55	1.646
	This organization believes that the opinions of people like me are legitimate (Control mutuality).	4.65	1.643
	Overall, I am happy with this organization (Satisfaction)	4.33	1.708
	This organization and I benefit from the relationship (Satisfaction).	4.11	1.828
	This organization treats people like me fairly and justly (Trust).	4.49	1.638
	This organization can be relied on to keep its promises (Trust).	4.54	1.660
	I feel that this organization is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to people like me (Commitment).	4.64	1.695
	I can see that this organization wants to maintain a relationship with people like me (Commitment).	4.69	1.671
RAPIDS Accountability	I believe that this organization took moral responsibility for the crisis.	4.85	1.662
	I believe that this organization took legal responsibility for the crisis.	5.06	1.626
	This organization acknowledges fully that it is responsible for the situation.	4.91	1.645
	This organization accepts its responsibility as it is for the problem and costs incurred to customers.	5.01	1.606
RAPIDS Promptness	This organization rapidly suggested clear solutions to solve this crisis.	4.76	1.682
	This organization acted on immediately to the problem.	4.74	1.698
	The organization acted resolutely to identify the victims from the beginning.	4.58	1.711
	The organization's response to the problem was fast and proactive.	4.69	1.684
RAPIDS Inclusivity	This organization was willing to reach out to all customers who were affected.	4.75	1.662
	The organization made efforts to hear all opinions wherever possible.	4.53	1.602
	The organization took care of all customers who were affected.	4.74	1.664
	I feel that this organization has worked adequately to hear all voices when handling the issue.	4.65	1.637

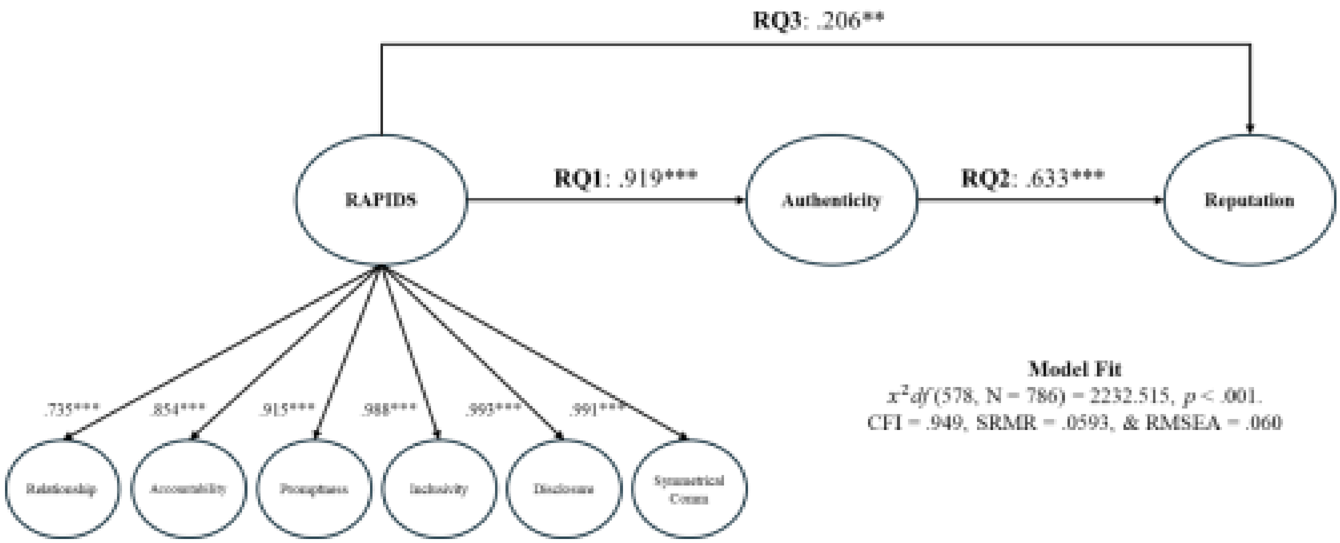
Variable	Measurement	Mean	SD
RAPIDS Disclosure	This organization is willing to be open to disclosing all information related to the crisis.	4.71	1.644
	This organization responds to requests for information with sincerity.	4.69	1.616
	The organization was open to sharing new information throughout the issue.	4.73	1.664
	The announcements made by this organization were informative and worthwhile to listen.	4.86	1.578
RAPIDS Symmetry	This organization considers customers' interests to be as important as its own interests when dealing with the issue.	4.70	1.665
	Most communication between this organization and its customers about the issue is two-way.	4.52	1.618
	This organization encouraged different opinions from its customers about the crisis.	4.51	1.644
	This organization communicated with its customers so that it could come up with a better response related to the issue.	4.71	1.584
Organizational Authenticity	I believe that this organization's actions are genuine.	4.86	1.660
	I feel that this organization is willing to admit to mistakes when they are made.	4.96	1.631
	I feel that this organization accepts and learns from mistakes.	4.98	1.602
	The organization's beliefs and actions are consistent.	4.80	1.615
Organizational Reputation	The organization is concerned with the well-being of its publics.	4.77	1.670
	The organization is basically HONEST.	4.67	1.657
	I trust the organization to tell the truth about the incident.	4.68	1.728
	Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what the organization says.	4.66	1.669

The organization in this survey refers to KIA. KIA is headquartered in South Korea.

Results

To evaluate the proposed model, this study applied the data-model fit criteria of Hu and Bentler (1999), recognized as one of the most conservative guidelines for model testing. According to Hu and Bentler, a model is considered tenable and strong when it achieves comparative fit index (CFI) ≥ .95 and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) ≤ .10, or root-mean-square error of and approximation (RMSEA) ≤ .06 and SRMR ≤ .10. As a structural model reached a good data-model fit, the study proceeded to interpret the hypotheses. The model of this study fit the data well, with model fit indices within an acceptable range: $x^2 df(578)$ = 2232.515, SRMR = .0593, RMSEA = .060, CFI = .949. All SEM findings are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Results of the Proposed Model



H1 predicted that RAPIDS model is positively associated with organizational authenticity, and weas supported (β = .919, p < .001). H2 posited that RAPIDS model is positively associated with organizational reputation, and was supported (β = .206, p < .001). H3 predicted a positive relationship between authenticity and organizational reputation, and as we predicted, the path was positive and significant (β = .633, p < .001).

Furthermore, we examined the mediating role of organizational authenticity between the RAPIDS model and organizational reputation. Bootstrap procedures were conducted to generate a 95% confidence interval for testing the indirect effect of organizational authenticity on organizational reputation. Bootstrapping involves repeatedly resampling the data to estimate the mediated effect and to compute confidence intervals for the effect (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). Preacher and Hayes (2008) recommend bootstrapping as "the most powerful and reasonable method of obtaining confidence limits for specific indirect effects under most conditions" (p. 886). Estimates in this study were calculated based on 5,000 bootstrapping samples. The indirect positive effects of organizational authenticity between RAPIDS model and organizational reputation were statistically significant (RAPIDS ⟶ Organizational Authenticity ⟶ Organizational Reputation, β = .583, p < .001). These findings suggest that organizational authenticity serves as a positive and critical mediator, enhancing organizational reputation through the RAPIDS model.

Discussion

The findings of this study significantly contribute to the field of crisis communication by validating the RAPIDS model as a strategic framework for enhancing organizational authenticity and reputation during crises. This research stands as the first empirical application of the RAPIDS model, providing evidence of its effectiveness in bridging theoretical insights and practical implementation. By adhering to the six principles of RAPIDS—relationship, accountability, promptness, inclusivity, disclosure, and symmetry—organizations can foster trust, credibility, and long-term relationships with their key publics, even in the face of reputational threats. These principles not only address immediate crisis management needs but also emphasize the importance of building sustainable relationships that endure beyond the crisis.

Theoretical Implications

This study makes a substantial theoretical contribution by advancing the understanding of authenticity as a critical cognitive outcome in crisis communication. Authenticity, defined by truthfulness, transparency, and consistency (Sen & Kim, 2012), serves as a mediator between the RAPIDS principles and organizational reputation. By linking the RAPIDS model to authenticity, this study highlights how strategic communication behaviors influence public perceptions during crises. The findings also extend the theoretical discourse by positioning RAPIDS as a versatile framework capable of addressing significant outcomes beyond reputation, such as public trust, stakeholder loyalty, and behavioral intentions.

Additionally, the research highlights the importance of situating crises within their broader historical and relational context. By emphasizing the need for organizations to consider pre-crisis relationships and long-term impacts, the RAPIDS model provides a holistic perspective on crisis management. This perspective aligns with contemporary views in crisis communication that advocate for relational and behavior-driven approaches rather than solely reactive measures. Future research could build on these theoretical insights by exploring how RAPIDS impacts other emerging phenomena, such as the megaphoning effect, where positive or negative word-of mouth communication can amplify an organization's reputation post-crisis.

Practical Implications

From a practical standpoint, this study highlights the utility of the RAPIDS model as a straightforward yet comprehensive tool for crisis management. The RAPIDS framework offers simplicity and clarity, making it accessible for practitioners to implement during high-pressure situations. The model's principles are designed to guide organizations in addressing key-publics' concerns while maintaining authenticity through transparent, truthful, and consistent communication.

The study also emphasizes the importance of relationship-building and inclusivity in crisis management. By fostering open communication and actively engaging stakeholders, organizations can enhance public perceptions of their authenticity. This, in turn, helps mitigate reputational risks and builds a foundation for resilience. Moreover, the findings reinforce the need for organizations to adopt proactive, value-driven strategies that extend beyond immediate crisis responses. The RAPIDS model's emphasis on disclosure and symmetry ensures that organizations communicate effectively and equitably, further strengthening trust and credibility. One of the key practical takeaways from this study is the RAPIDS model's adaptability to different stages of a crisis. Its principles provide actionable guidelines for pre-crisis preparation, in-crisis response, and post-crisis recovery. Practitioners often struggle to apply theoretical frameworks in real-world settings; however, the RAPIDS model bridges this gap by offering a pragmatic approach grounded in evidence. By incorporating RAPIDS into their crisis communication strategies, organizations can navigate crises more effectively while enhancing their long-term reputational standing.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the RAPIDS model is both theoretically robust and practically effective in managing organizational crises. By emphasizing fundamental principles such as relationship-building, transparency, and inclusivity, the model not only enhances authenticity and reputation but also provides a comprehensive framework for addressing public concerns. Its simplicity and adaptability make it an invaluable tool for practitioners, while its theoretical insights pave the way for future research. As the field of crisis communication continues to evolve, the RAPIDS model offers a strategic, evidence-based approach that bridges the gap between theory and practice, ultimately contributing to more effective crisis management and stronger organization-public relationships.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the significant findings, several limitations warrant attention in future research. First, the application of the RAPIDS model should be extended to a broader range of organizational crises to assess its generalizability and effectiveness in diverse scenarios. This includes crises across varying industries, cultural contexts, and scales of impact. Second, the study's focus was primarily on corporate organizations, leaving an opportunity to explore its relevance and applicability to nonprofit organizations and those in the public sector. These types of organizations often face unique challenges and expectations during crises, which could yield valuable insights into the model's adaptability and effectiveness. Third, while this study examined the model's influence on organizational reputation, future research could investigate additional crisis outcomes, such as the positive or negative megaphoning effect. This refers to the public's tendency to engage in either positive or negative word-of-mouth communication about an organization, which can significantly amplify or mitigate the impact of a crisis. By addressing these areas, future studies can further refine and expand the utility of the RAPIDS model as a comprehensive framework for crisis management.

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The Role of Leadership Communication in Organizations' AI Adoption: The Impact of CEO Transformational Leadership and Supervisors' Motivating Language Use

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has led to a surge in organizations incorporating AI tools into their daily operations. Amid this trend, however, organizations face multifaceted challenges in adopting AI. This study investigates how CEO transformational leadership and supervisors' motivating language influence employees' openness to and behavioral support for AI adoption. Findings showed that CEO transformational leadership enhances employee behavioral support for AI adoption, and supervisors' motivating language positively impacts both employee openness to and behavioral support for AI adoption. Reduced employee feeling of uncertainty mediates these effects. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in internal communication, leadership, change communication, and technology adoption. The findings will aid leaders and organizations in easing employee anxiety around AI, ultimately fostering more successful AI implementations in an increasingly automated business environment.

Keywords: Leadership Communication, CEO Transformational Leadership, Supervisors' Motivating Language, AI Adoption

The Role of Leadership Communication in Organizations' AI Adoption: The Impact of CEO Transformational Leadership and Supervisors' Motivating Language Use

The rapid advancement of generative artificial intelligence (AI) has led to a surge in organizations incorporating AI tools into their daily operations. According to McKinsey & Company's state of AI study in 2024, 72% of organizations reported using AI in at least one business function, a notable rise from about 50% in previous years. The growing emphasis on AI reflects a larger recognition that adopting AI is no longer a luxury but a strategic imperative for businesses seeking to remain competitive and innovative in a rapidly evolving marketplace (McKnight et al., 2024). Amid this trend, however, organizations face multifaceted challenges in adopting AI, including concerns over data privacy and quality, integration with existing systems, and, notably, employee resistance to change (Yue et al., 2019; Men et al, 2024). Research has revealed multiple reasons why some employees resist AI: fears of job displacement, uncertainty about how AI will alter existing workflows, skepticism regarding algorithmic transparency, or perceptions that adopting AI requires complex, unfamiliar skill sets (Bucher et al., 2021; Bankins et al, 2024). When such concerns go unaddressed, employees may withhold cooperation, minimize engagement with AI tools, or otherwise delay the implementation of AI-based initiatives—thereby undermining the organization's efforts to harness AI's transformative potential (Neumann, et al., 2022).

Internal communication research highlights the crucial role of CEOs and supervisors in influencing employee attitudes and behaviors —such as trust, commitment, engagement, and supportive actions—especially during periods of organizational change (e.g., Men et al., 2022, 2024). As organizations begin to leverage AI technology to automate tedious tasks and enhance workplace efficiency (Bankins et al, 2024), a key challenge for leaders is effectively communicating AI-related change to employees to reduce resistance and enhance AI adoption and integration. Recognizing AI as a transformative force for organizations, this study aims to investigate how leadership communication—specifically, transformational CEO leadership and supervisors' use of motivating language—influence employees' openness to AI and their behavioral support for AI integration (e.g., cooperation, championing). To further examine how these leadership behaviors and communication strategies work, this study explores the mediating effect of employees' feelings of uncertainty during organizations' AI transformation.

In a nutshell, this study employs a theoretical model to predict that effective leadership communication lowers employees' feelings of uncertainty, thereby increasing their willingness to adopt AI. As one of the first efforts to explore the intersection of leadership communication and AI adoption, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in internal communication, leadership, change communication, and technology adoption. These findings will aid leaders and organizations in easing employee anxiety around AI, ultimately fostering more successful AI implementations in a dynamic and increasingly automated business environment.

Literature Review

AI Adoption as an Organizational Planned Change

Organizational change refers to the process by which organizations adapt to shifts driven by either internal or external environmental changes. This process involves reshaping organizational structures and updating strategies to remain effective and competitive (Devos et al., 2007; Shin et al., 2012). Organizational change can take various forms, including strategic shifts, cultural transformations, and structural adjustments such as reengineering, downsizing, or mergers and acquisitions (Herold et al., 2008). Each form of organizational change requires tailored leadership, effective organizational management, and clear communication to ensure the successful implementation of strategies and the smooth development of change initiatives (Luo & Jiang, 2014). In recent years, technological advancements have emerged as a major driver of organizational change in today's dynamic business environment (Yeo & Ajam, 2010; Kanitz et al., 2023). One key strategy organizations commonly adopt is the application of new technologies, with artificial intelligence (AI) representing a significant and transformative shift (Oswick, 2024; McKnight et al., 2024). Specifically, McKinsey & Company (2024) highlights that AI has become a transformative tool, enabling organizations to achieve unprecedented efficiency, innovation, and scalability.

Recent research on change management has centered around two key themes: employee focused studies and leader-focused research (Men et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2019). In both areas, communication emerges as a critical factor in determining the effectiveness of change management efforts (Men, 2014; Matos Marques Simoes & Esposito, 2014). Leadership and communication are deeply intertwined, as effective communication is fundamental to how leaders influence and motivate others, build trust, and foster strong relationships. De Vries and colleagues (2010) defined a leader's communication as "a distinctive set of interpersonal communicative behaviors geared toward the optimization of hierarchical relationships in order to reach certain group or individual goals." (p. 368) Through effective communication, leaders can address employee concerns, promote transparency, and reduce resistance to change (Men et al., 2021).

Research on change management and communication has revealed sundry benefits of effective leadership communication during change, particularly in fostering employees' openness to change and encouraging behavioral support for change. Openness to change refers to employees' emotional willingness to embrace change and their acceptance of its consequences (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Behavioral support for change pertains to employees' positive actions toward organizational changes (Shin et al., 2012). Herscovitch and Meyer (2002) classified behavioral support for organizational change into three distinct levels. Compliance involves fulfilling the basic requirements of the change, often with reluctance. Cooperation, on the other hand, reflects a willingness to embrace the intent of the change and make moderate sacrifices to contribute to its progress. At the highest level, championing entails exceeding expectations by making significant sacrifices and actively advocating for change to others. While compliance aligns with formal employee responsibilities, both cooperation and championing are considered voluntary, as they stem from discretionary behaviors rather than mandatory obligations. To examine employee AI adoption, similar to Men et al. (2022), the current study focuses on employee voluntary behavioral support (i.e., cooperation and championing). These behaviors are particularly important in AI adoption, as successful integration of such transformative technologies often depends on employees actively embracing and advocating for change, rather than merely meeting minimum requirements.

CEO Transformational Leadership and Supervisors' Use of Motivating Language

To explore how leadership at various levels (i.e., executive and supervisory) influence employee AI adoption, the current study incorporates two prominent leadership and leadership communication frameworks: transformational leadership and Motivating Language Theory. Bass and Avolio (1994) defined four dimensions of transformational leadership: idealized influence, where leaders act as role models inspiring trust and admiration; inspirational motivation, which involves communicating a compelling vision to energize and align followers; intellectual stimulation, where leaders encourage creativity, critical thinking, and innovation; and individualized consideration, which focuses on providing personalized support and mentoring to help followers achieve their potential. Transformational leaders foster trust, engagement, and empowerment among their followers (Men, 2014; Yukl, 2006).

Previous studies have examined the role of transformational leadership during organizational changes and its impact on members of the organization. For instance, Yue et al. (2019) found that while this leadership style does not directly promote employee openness to change, it significantly enhances organizational trust, which acts as a mediating factor in fostering positive attitudes toward change and employees' intentions to support it. Other research highlights its significant influence during periods of change and uncertainty. Leaders who inspire and stimulate their employees help them understand the changes and their necessity (Babić et al., 2014). Moreover, such leadership significantly contributes to the success of change management by motivating employees, fostering a supportive environment, and building trust (Bagga et al., 2022).

Transformational leadership is particularly relevant in AI adoption, where organizational change can create uncertainty and resistance. By articulating a clear vision for how AI aligns with organizational goals and values from the top, transformational CEOs can reduce employee apprehensions, promote confidence in the technology, and inspire a collective commitment to its successful implementation. Their ability to inspire innovative thinking and empower employees further underscores the crucial role of transformational leadership, especially when it starts with the top leaders, in driving employees' adoption of AI.

This study applies the Motivating Language (ML) Theory to explore the relationship between supervisors' communication and employees' adoption of AI. In the context of daily supervisor-employee interactions, research has shown that leaders' strategic use of motivating language can reduce uncertainty, enhance understanding, and strengthen relational bonds. Specifically, this study focuses on two key aspects of motivating language in AI adoption: direction-giving and empathetic communication. Direction-giving language involves a supervisor's efforts to minimize uncertainty by clearly outlining purposes, tasks, and reward contingencies, enabling employees to better navigate organizational changes (J. Mayfield et al., 2017). Empathetic language, on the other hand, addresses employees' emotional needs by conveying appreciation, care, and understanding, as well as offering validation and support during transitions (J. Mayfield et al., 2017).

While limited research has examined the specific role of supervisors' motivating language in fostering employees' openness to AI adoption and behavioral support for such changes, existing evidence points to a positive link. For example, studies indicate that leadership communication providing strategic direction can alleviate employee uncertainty, while communication that demonstrates care and support encourages openness to change and promotes active behavioral support (Men et al., 2020; Venus et al., 2019). These findings emphasize the critical role of supervisors' strategic use of motivating language in facilitating successful organizational transitions, particularly in adopting emerging technologies like AI. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: CEOs' transformational leadership is positively associated with employees' openness to AI adoption (H1a) and behavioral support for AI adoption (H1b).

H2: Supervisors' use of motivating language is positively associated with employees' openness to organizational AI adoption (H2a) and behavioral support for AI adoption (H2b).

Feelings of Uncertainty about AI Adoption

Uncertainty, defined as "an individual's perceived inability to predict something accurately" (Milliken, 1987, p. 136), often arises from ambiguous, contradictory, or insufficient information (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). During organizational changes, uncertainty is frequently experienced among employees, and such uncertainties may encompass various organizational issues, including the rationale behind the change, the implementation process, and the anticipated outcomes of the change (Allen et al., 2007). Employee uncertainty has been consistently linked to a range of negative organizational outcomes. As Bordia and colleagues (2004) argue, the adverse effects of uncertainty stem primarily from the perceived lack of control it fosters. This perceived lack of control can evoke a variety of psychological and emotional responses, including heightened anxiety (DiFonzo & Bordia, 2002), increased psychological strain (Jimmieson & Terry, 1999), and feelings of helplessness (Martinko & Gardner, 1982). These responses not only affect individual employees but also have broader implications for organizational performance. For example, research has suggested that high uncertainty is associated with reduced job satisfaction, increased turnover intentions, and overall, lower levels of employee well-being (Emberland & Rundmo, 2010).

In technological innovation, uncertainty can pose significant barriers to innovation adoption and development (Jalonen, 2012). Several factors contribute to this process. First, the ambiguity surrounding the expectations and potential consequences of innovations—such as artificial intelligence—can diminish individuals' motivation to engage with the new technologies (Ye et al., 2024). The lack of clarity, therefore, may undermine confidence in the perceived value or feasibility of adoption. Second, the unpredictability of technological innovation can lead to disruptions in existing systems—including technological infrastructures, organizational attitudes, and demand patterns—which can generate resistance from stakeholders (Talwar et al., 2023).

Finally, technical challenges represent a critical source of uncertainty. Empirical evidence indicates that such obstacles can inhibit the practical implementation of innovations and users' willingness to adopt them (Littler & Pearson, 1972). Informed by existing literature, we posit that change-related uncertainty can deter employees from embracing AI and hinder organizational efforts to integrate these innovations effectively, proposing the following hypothesis:

H3: Employees' feelings of uncertainty regarding AI adoption are negatively associated with employees' openness (H3a) and behavioral support for AI adoption (H3b).

Leadership and Communication in Reducing Uncertainty

Research highlights the pivotal role of leadership and communication in mitigating uncertainty during organizational changes. CEO transformational leadership has been shown to reduce employees' feelings of uncertainty (Bass, 1999). By providing a clear vision for AI adoption and addressing employees' concerns, transformational leaders foster a sense of control and direction. This type of leadership is particularly important in AI adoption, where uncertainty can arise from fears of job displacement or a lack of understanding about the technology's implications.

A transformational leader's ability to articulate a compelling vision for AI adoption can align organizational goals with employee aspirations, thereby reducing ambiguity. Research by Rafferty and Griffin (2004) indicates that transformational leadership is strongly associated with employees' trust in leadership and their perceptions of organizational support during change initiatives. Furthermore, individualized consideration—a core component of transformational leadership—allows leaders to address employees' unique concerns, ensuring they feel heard and valued. This personalized approach builds psychological safety, a critical factor in reducing resistance to change (Edmondson, 1999).

Supervisory communication, particularly the use of motivating language, also plays a critical role in alleviating uncertainty. Direction-giving language clarifies expectations and procedural uncertainties, while empathetic language acknowledges and validates employees' emotions. For instance, Allen et al. (2007) found that quality change communication significantly improves employees' openness to organizational change by reducing uncertainty. Similarly, research by Liu et al. (2010) highlights that middle managers' ability to convey clear and motivating messages enhances team cohesion and change readiness.To test the relationships between CEO's transformational leadership and supervisors' use of motivating language, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4: CEOs' transformational leadership is negatively associated with employees' feeling of uncertainty regarding AI adoption.

H5: Supervisors' use of motivating language is negatively associated with employees' feelings of uncertainty regarding AI adoption.

In addition to their direct effects, CEO transformational leadership and supervisory communication may indirectly influence employees' attitudes and behaviors by reducing uncertainty. Research on organizational change suggests that reduced uncertainty enhances employees' cognitive and emotional readiness for change. For example, Bordia et al. (2004) demonstrated that uncertainty reduction is critical for increasing employees' acceptance of and commitment to new technologies. When transformational leaders address employees' concerns through vision articulation and individualized support, they not only reduce uncertainty but also cultivate a positive perception of AI's value. Similarly, supervisors who use motivating language clarify procedural details, provide emotional reassurance, and reinforce the broader significance of AI adoption, further reducing uncertainty and encouraging supportive behaviors. Given these dynamics, uncertainty could serve as a critical mediating mechanism through which leadership and communication influence employees' openness and behavioral support for AI adoption. We thus hypothesize

H6: Employees' feelings of uncertainty regarding AI adoption partially mediate the effects of CEO transformational leadership (H6a) and supervisors' use of motivating language (H6b) on employees' openness for AI adoption.

H7: Employees' feelings of uncertainty regarding AI adoption partially mediate the effects of CEO transformational leadership (H7a) and supervisors' use of motivating language (H7b) on employees' behavioral support for AI adoption.

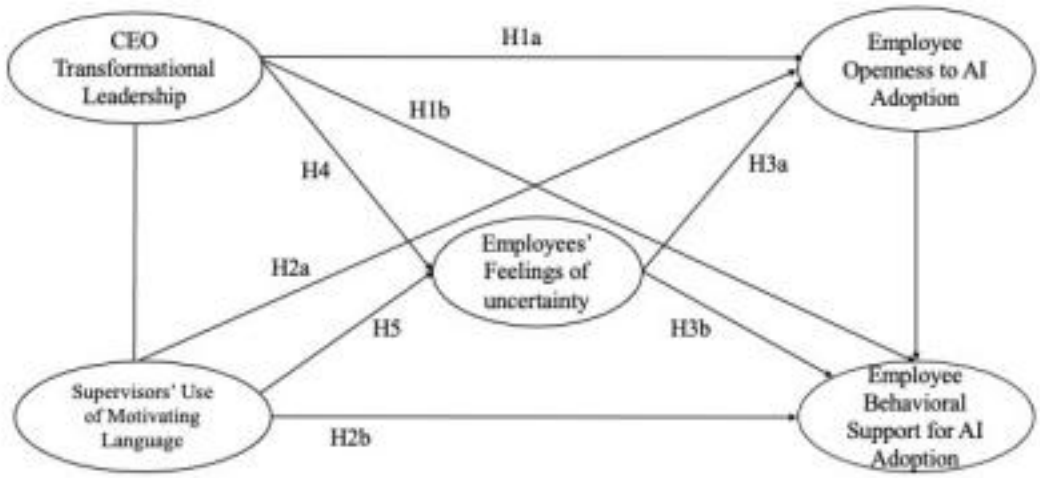

Figure 1
Leadership Communication in AI Adoption Conceptual Model

Method

To test the conceptual model depicted in Figure 1, we conducted an online survey over three weeks in November and December 2024. This survey targeted full-time employees in the US whose organizations adopted any AI tools in the past two years. Respondents report 12 AI tools and the majority of employees (76%) used generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, Co-Pilot and Midjourney, followed by 40.6% of natural language processing tools, 34.1% of machine learning platforms, 25.7% of AI-based security tools, 25.3% of AI for human resources tools, 21.4% of AI-powered marketing tools, 20.4% of image and video recognition tools, 15.6% of AI-enhanced customer relationship management systems, 14.4% of AI-driven decision support systems, 8.4% of robotics. The percentage of respondents in each age was 18-24 (9.5%), 25-34 (36.7%), 35-44 (28.6%), 45-54 (18.0%), 55-64 (7.2%), with total 958 employees in the US and 55.5% male and 44.1% female. Participants represented 19 industries, with the largest sectors being information, finance, insurance, and health care and social assistance, which together accounted for 41.9% of respondents. A majority (76.4%) had at least a college education.

The workforce tenure was relatively short, with 62.4% of participants reporting less than six years at their current organization. The racial composition of the sample was 59.4% White, 26.9% Black or African American, 4.7% Hispanic, and 6.2% Asian. Additionally, 87.7% reported an annual household income above $50,000. The breakdown of job roles included 58.7% mid-entry, 25.3% senior-level, 9.9% entry-level and 6.2% executive level. Regarding work modes, 44.1% (n = 422) reported that they mostly worked onsite, while 37.0% (n = 354) primarily worked hybrid (either at home or in a hybrid setting).

Measures

The measures employed in this study were adapted from prior public relations, organization management, and organizational communication literature. We utilized a seven point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), to assess the focal variables.

Specifically, leaders' use of motivating language regarding AI adoption with two dimensions: direction-giving language with 7 items, (e.g., "My supervisor gives me useful explanations of what needs to be done in my work," $\alpha = .95$; Mayfield & Mayfield, 2009); empathetic language with 6 items (e.g., "My supervisor gives us praise for our good work", α=.92; J. Mayfield et al., 1995). Transformational leadership was measured with 4 dimensions (Avolio & Bass, 1997): idealized influence was measured with 2 items (e.g., "The CEO in my organization has a clear understanding of where we are going regarding AI adoption", $\alpha = .94$); intellectual stimulation was measured by 3 items (e.g., "The CEO in my organization challenges us to think about old problems in new ways during the AI adoption process", $\alpha = .92$); inspirational motivation was measured by 3 items (e.g., "The CEO in my organization says things that make employees proud to be part of this organization during the AI adoption process," $\alpha = .90$); individualized consideration was measured by 3 items (e.g., "The CEO in my organization behaves in a manner that is thoughtful of employees' needs during the AI adoption process. ," $\alpha = .94$).

The employee feeling of uncertainty was measured across three dimensions (Allen et al., 2007; Men et al., 2022): Job-related uncertainty with 2 items (e.g., "I am uncertain about the future of my position during the adoption of AI tools in my organization," $\alpha = .68$); Implementation uncertainty with 3 items (e.g., "I am uncertain about the implementation process of AI adoption in my organization," $\alpha = .87$); Goal/strategic uncertainty with 3 items (e.g., "I am uncertain about the strategic direction and intended outcomes of AI adoption in my organization," $\alpha = .92$). Finally, openness to AI adoption was assessed using a 4-item scale (e.g., "I would consider myself open to using AI tools in my organization," $\alpha = .82$; Men et al., 2020; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Employee supportive behaviors for AI adoption were measured across two dimensions: cooperation and championing (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002). Cooperation was evaluated with 4 items (e.g., "I work consistently toward adopting AI tools in my organization," $\alpha = .83$). Championing was assessed with 6 items (e.g., "I encourage the participation of others in my organization's adoption of AI tools," $\alpha = .91$). Additionally, we also measured potential control variables. The perceived usefulness of AI was assessed using a 14-item scale (e.g., "My job would be difficult to perform without AI tools", $\alpha = .96$; Davis, 1989). Technological self efficacy was assessed using a 3-item scale (e.g., "I feel confident explaining to others how to use the latest AI tools," $\alpha = .87$; Laver et al., 2012). Prior attitude toward AI was assessed using a 4-item scale (e.g., "I can rely on AI tools to be working when I need them," $\alpha = .92$; Lippert, 2007).

Results

A series of regression analyses were conducted to examine the potential effects of demographic characteristics on the primary variables of the study. Respondents' prior attitudes toward AI and perceived usefulness of AI were found to significantly affect the focal 3 variables examined in this study, which were therefore controlled in the subsequent SEM analysis. Specifically, employees who had a more positive prior attitude toward AI (β=-.25, $t = -5.74$, $p < .001$) and more positive perceived usefulness of AI (β=-.21, $t = -5.13$, $p < .001$) tended to rate less uncertainty. Similarly, employees who had more prior positive attitude toward AI (β=.27, $t = 7.75$, $p < .001$) and more positive perceived usefulness of AI (β=.45, $t = 13.48$, $p < .001$) tended to rate higher openness on AI adoption. Finally, employees who had more positive prior attitude toward AI (β=.19, $t = 6.96$, $p < .001$) and more positive perceived usefulness of AI (β=.42, t =

16.57, $p < .001$) tended to rate more supportive behaviors on AI adoption. Technological self efficacy was found to be positively associated with supportive behaviors on AI adoption (β=.20, t =10.34, $p < .001$) and feelings of uncertainty (β=-.22, t = -7.03, $p < .001$), but not statistically significant with openness on AI adoption (β=-.01, t = -.58, p = .57).

Results of Structural Equation Modeling Analysis

The data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS 29.0. The two-step SEM method was utilized as it enables validating multiple hypotheses and examining the direct and indirect relationships in the model (Ullman & Bentler, 2012). The maximum likelihood (ML) method was used for model estimation. The test of the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model revealed a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(923)=3056.67$, $p<.001$, $\chi2/df=3.31$, RMSEA=0.05 (90% confidence interval [0.047, 0.051], RMR=0.11, TLI = 0.94, and CFI = 0.95. Table 2 reports the standardized factor loadings of the measurement items, average variance extracted (AVE), and composite reliabilities (Colwell, 2016; Weiss, 2011). The standardized factor loadings for all measurement items ranged from .61 to .93[1].

Then, second-order structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis was used to test the hypothesized model. The model also showed a good fit to the data: $\chi^2(762)=2653.40$, $p<.001$, $\chi^2/df=3.48$, RMSEA=0.05 (90% confidence interval [0.049, 0.053], RMR=0.08, TLI = 0.94, and CFI = 0.95, which was thus retained as the final model.

Hypotheses Testing

The results (see Figure 2) showed that after controlling for employees' prior attitudes toward AI and perceived usefulness of AI, the CEO's transformational leadership significantly influenced employees' behavioral support for AI adoption (H1b:β=.10,p<.001) but not openness to AI adoption (H1a: β=.08,p=.08). Therefore, H1 was partially supported. Supervisors' use of motivating language significantly enhanced employees' behavioral support for AI adoption (H2b: β=.23,p<.001) as well as employees' openness to AI adoption (H2a: β=-.31,p<.001). Therefore, H2 was supported. CEOs' transformational leadership had a significantly negative effect on employees' feelings of uncertainty (H3:β= -.35,p<.001), supporting H3. Supervisors' use of motivating language also negatively affected employees' feelings of uncertainty (H4: β= -.44,p<.001), supporting H4. Employees' feelings of uncertainty negatively affected employees' openness for AI adoption (H5a: β= -.31,p<.001), although it did not significantly influence employees' behavior support for AI adoption (H5b: β=.05,p = .08). Thus, H5 received partial support.

The mediating effect of feelings of uncertainty was all found on two focal variables. Specifically, feelings of uncertainty significantly mediated the effect of CEO transformational leadership on employees' openness to AI adoption (H6a: β= 0.22, p<.005, [95% CI: .16, .27]) and the effect of supervisors' use of motivating language on employees' openness for AI adoption (H6b: β= 0.19, p<.005, [95% CI: .13, .24]). Therefore, H6 was supported. The mediating effect of feelings of uncertainty was also found on employees' behavior support for AIadoption from CEO transformational leadership (H7a: β= .18,p<.005, [95% CI: .14, .23]) and supervisors' use of motivating language (H8b: β= 0.15, p<.005, [95% CI: .11, .19]). Therefore, H7 was also supported.

[1] The second item of openness for AI adoption (i.e., I am somewhat resistant to using AI tools in my organization) was excluded due to low factor loading (.33).

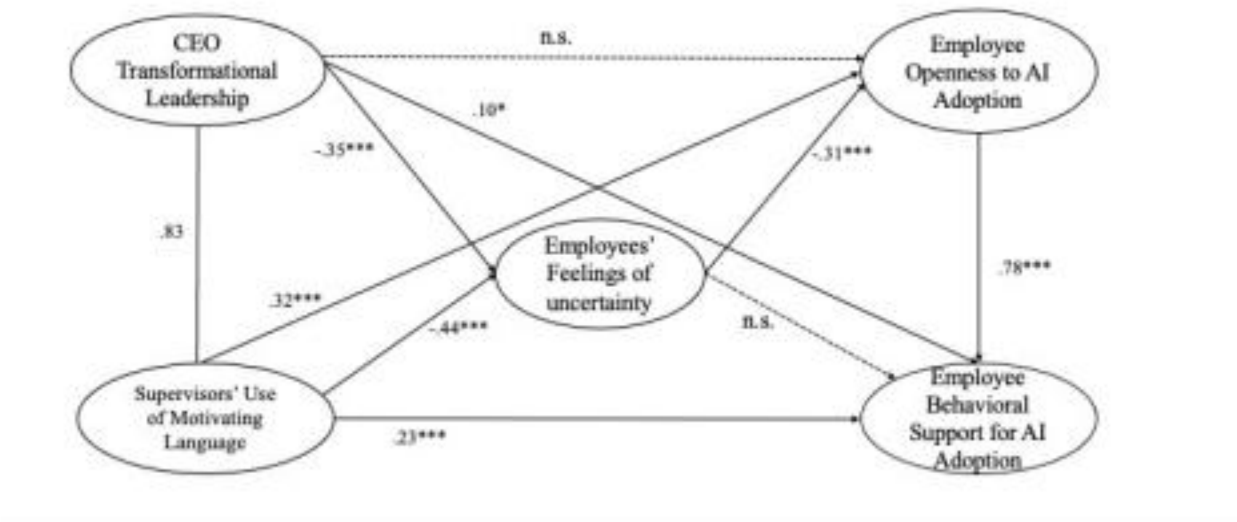

Figure 2
Results of SEM analysis

Note. Standardized regression coefficients were reported. **p < .01, ***p < .001, n.s. Non-significant.

Discussion

This study provides important insights into the role of leadership communication, particularly CEO transformational leadership and supervisors' use of motivating language, in fostering employees' adoption of AI within organizations. By exploring how these leadership and communication behaviors influence employee openness and behavioral support, the findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that drive successful technology adoption.

The results underscore the significant role of CEO transformational leadership in promoting employees' behavioral support for AI adoption, although its direct impact on openness to AI adoption was not statistically significant. These findings align with the constructs of effort expectancy and facilitating conditions from the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT). Effort expectancy refers to the degree of ease associated with using a system (Venkatesh et al., 2003). UTAUT posits that perceived ease of use, social influence, and organizational support, resources, and infrastructure can drive technology acceptance. Through transformational leadership, CEOs inspire confidence, set a compelling vision, and promote an innovative environment that supports the adoption of new technologies. However, while this leadership style effectively drives employee behaviors, the non-significant impact on openness to AI adoption suggests that attitudes may require additional interventions, such as showcasing tangible benefits and practical applications of AI tools.

Meanwhile, supervisors' use of motivating language demonstrated a robust positive effect on both employees' openness to and behavioral support for AI adoption. This finding highlights the critical role of social influence (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Supervisors, through their day-to-day interactions, exert a strong influence on employees by addressing their concerns, reducing ambiguity, and reinforcing the importance of AI adoption. Specifically, direction giving language provides clarity and actionable guidance, while empathetic language fosters trust and emotional security, creating an environment where employees feel supported and confident in their organization's commitment to AI adoption.

Both transformational leadership and motivating language significantly reduced employees' uncertainty regarding AI adoption. This finding underscores the critical role of leadership communication in addressing the inherent ambiguity associated with integrating new technologies. Transformational leaders and supervisors who employ motivating language create an open and supportive communication environment, serving as a facilitating condition as laid out in UTAUT. By leveraging these communication strategies, organizations can mitigate employee resistance, foster trust in the infrastructure, and ensure smoother transitions to emerging technologies.

Lastly, feelings of uncertainty were found to mediate the effects of both CEO transformational leadership and supervisors' motivating language on employees' openness to and behavioral support for AI adoption. This finding provides empirical support for the critical role of managing uncertainty in organizational change. Uncertainty is well-documented as a barrier to employee engagement, negatively impacting both organizational outcomes and employee well being (Emberland & Rundmo, 2010). By reducing uncertainty, transformational leaders and supervisors enable employees to better understand the purpose and implications of AI adoption, fostering a sense of psychological safety and readiness for change.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study makes several important contributions to AI adoption, change management, and organizational leadership communication literature. First, it advances our understanding of technology adoption by revealing how CEO leadership and supervisory communication inside the organization can create a more supportive environment for employees' AI adoption. Specifically, by demonstrating that supervisory use of motivating language can serve as an organizational infrastructure resource—alongside providing guidance, role expectations, and emotional support—this research offers new insights into how leaders at different levels of the organization can foster employees' openness and intention to adopt emerging AI technologies. Second, this study contributes to the change communication literature by highlighting the role of CEO transformational leadership and supervisors' motivating language in facilitating organizational change. Effective top leadership that clarifies the vision, serves as a role model, provides individualized support, and empowers employees to innovate can mitigate uncertainty around AI integration. Meanwhile, supervisors who communicate clear direction, transparency, and empathy enable employees to cope with the stress of change and reduce their feelings of uncertainty. The results show that minimizing uncertainty fosters employees' openness to adopt AI, though it does not necessarily guarantee behavioral support—suggesting that different drivers may underlie attitudinal versus behavioral reactions to change.

Finally, by examining both CEO and supervisor communication side by side, this study enriches leadership communication and internal communication scholarship with evidence on the distinct yet complementary effects of top-level strategic leadership and frontline supervisory communication. In doing so, it extends Motivating Language Theory (MLT) into a high-stakes, technology-driven organizational change scenario. The empirical findings validate the premise that motivating language not only shapes employees' attitudes and actions in general but also has specific efficacy in the context of AI adoption. This offers nuanced empirical support for MLT's applicability to modern, technology-focused organizational transformations, reinforcing the theory's relevance beyond its traditional settings.

The findings of this study offer several actionable insights for organizations aiming to successfully integrate AI into their operations. First, CEOs and supervisors must work collaboratively to address both the cognitive and emotional aspects of change. While CEOs provide vision and strategic alignment, supervisors play a crucial role in translating these goals into actionable guidance and fostering trust at the individual level. CEO transformational leadership can help reduce uncertainty by articulating strategic objectives for AI initiatives, showing how these initiatives align with the organization's broader mission, and reinforcing the potential long-term benefits for both employees and the organization. This strategic framing ensures that employees see AI implementation as more than a technological upgrade—it becomes part of a forward-thinking culture that values innovation and continuous improvement.

Second, immediate supervisors' use of motivating language—which combines directive guidance and empathy—emerges as an important tool for fostering practical support and managing the emotional aspects of change. Organizations should therefore equip supervisors with the necessary communication training, coaching skills, and resources to provide clear role expectations, address concerns, and highlight success stories around AI. This kind of frontline support not only boosts employee confidence but also makes the transition process more transparent and less intimidating, thereby fostering both openness and behavioral acceptance. Third, the negative link between uncertainty and AI openness implies that leaders at all levels need to address and mitigate employees' uncertainty and concerns early in the change process. Frequent, two-way communication—such as town halls, Q&A sessions, and feedback loops—can help employees feel heard and supported. These efforts can be reinforced through structured onboarding for new AI tools, hands-on workshops, and dedicated support hotlines or "help desks." Taking a holistic approach that combines executive vision, and frontline supervisory support will not only lessen uncertainty but also encourage employees to embrace AI in ways that go beyond mere compliance to genuine organizational innovation.

Additionally, employees' attitudes toward AI and their perceived usefulness of AI—both controlled for in this study—significantly influenced their openness and behavioral support for AI adoption. Therefore, organizations and leaders should proactively highlight the practical benefits and value of AI to employees, making sure to address the core question of "what's in it for me?" This involves communicating the personal and professional gains that AI adoption can bring at work, thereby strengthening employees' willingness to embrace the technology and contribute to the organization's AI transformation process.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study sheds light on the influence of CEO leadership and supervisor communication in fostering AI adoption, several limitations should be addressed in future research. First, the cross-sectional design prevents drawing causal conclusions about how leadership communication influences employee attitudes and behaviors over time. As AI technologies and organizational dynamics evolve rapidly, longitudinal studies are recommended to observe how employees' uncertainty, openness, and behavioral support for AI may shift at different stages of the technology's implementation and use. Longitudinal designs also allow for establishing true causations.

Second, the study's focus on transformational leadership and supervisors' motivating language offers only one perspective on how leaders can support AI integration. Future research could broaden its analytical scope by examining other leadership styles—such as authentic leadership, servant leadership, or vigilant leadership—and investigating a wider range of CEO behaviors. Exploring diverse communication frameworks or theories beyond Motivating Language Theory may also yield deeper insights into the complexity of leadership communication in technology adoption.

Third, the study relied on single-employee reports using a quantitative survey approach, which limits the depth of understanding around how leaders' and employees' perspectives converge or diverge in practice. Incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, or ethnographic studies could provide a more nuanced view of how leadership communication unfolds in real time. Insights from leaders themselves, alongside employee reflections, would enrich the field's understanding of what specific communication strategies work best and why.

Finally, this study emphasizes uncertainty reduction as the primary mechanism explaining how leadership communication fosters AI adoption. Future research could investigate other theoretical lenses—such as self-determination theory (focusing on autonomy, competence, and relatedness), conservation of resources (examining resource gains and losses), or psychological safety—to uncover additional pathways through which leadership communication might enhance employees' openness and engagement with AI. Broadening the conceptual framework would add greater complexity and clarity to understanding how organizations can effectively navigate AI-driven transformations.

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The Influence of ESG Communication on Stakeholder Perception of Large U.S. Organizations – A Quantitative Content Analysis Among Corporations, Public Services and NGOs in the PR Context

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Abstract

In recent years, Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) communication, often referred to as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication, has become a crucial aspect of corporate strategy (Ajayi & Mmutle, 2021). For quite some time, it appeared that the way companies communicate their ESG activities could significantly influence their stakeholders' perceptions (Kim & Ferguson, 2018). Currently, these aspects are discussed in many contexts, and the future of these approaches remains somewhat unclear at times. However, many differences can be observed regarding this question across different continents –and sometimes even within them – and in various political systems or settings. This makes the daily work of communication professionals in large organizations even more challenging than ever before, as they may have to operate in even more different political environments.

This study employs a quantitative content analysis of ESG disclosures across large U.S. organizations, using a sample of corporate reports to assess disclosure practices and an analytical framework based on the current European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS). Findings indicate that ESG reporting in the U.S., at least in recent years, has prioritized environmental aspects over social and governance components, with significant disparities between publicly traded corporations and non-profit or public-sector organizations. Statistical analyses revealed substantial differences in the size of ESG disclosures, emphasizing the variability in reporting practices. Additionally, correlation analysis identified strong linkages between certain ESG topics. However, many question on the issue remain open.

Keywords: Public Relations, Company Reporting, Sustainability; CSR, ESG, SDG, ESRS.

Introduction & Context

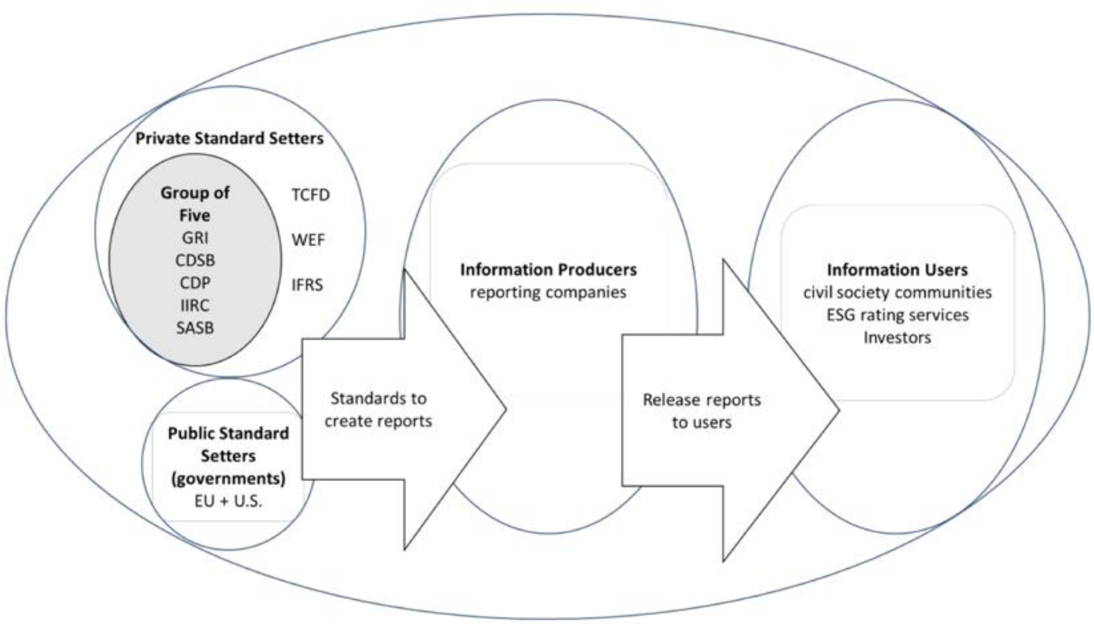
Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting has become increasingly important for corporate accountability and transparency in recent years. This paper examines the evolving landscape of ESG reporting frameworks, with a focus on the United States' approach and a comparison to European practices. Both regions acknowledge the significance of ESG factors in investment decisions and corporate governance, but their regulatory frameworks and implementation strategies have developed along different paths (Al Amosh et al., 2024).

In the United States, the current ESG regulatory framework reflects the country's dynamic and diverse business environment. In the past, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has taken proactive steps by proposing rules for climate-related disclosures, emphasizing the principle of financial materiality (Policy Integrity Institute, 2023). At the state level, the U.S. showcases a laboratory of democracy, with various approaches to ESG integration. This diversity allows for experimentation and the development of best practices tailored to specific regional needs and priorities. Some states have taken the lead in encouraging ESG integration, while others have chosen alternative approaches, reflecting the complex and nuanced nature of ESG issues in the American context.

In comparison, the European Union has developed its own distinct approach to ESG reporting, including the EU Taxonomy Regulation and the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) (Riddle, 2024). These initiatives offer a valuable point of reference for ongoing discussions in the U.S. about the future of ESG reporting. The development of different standards in various regions and jurisdictions further complicates the situation as well as do some current economic and political developments. Sulkowski & Jebe (2022) have tried to give an overview as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The ESG Reporting Governance Ecosystem by Sulkowski, A. & Jebe, R. (2022)



This paper will explore the implications of these different approaches for corporate accountability, investor decision-making, and the potential for global harmonization of ESG standards. By analyzing the strengths of each system, we aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on best practices in ESG reporting and its role in promoting sustainable business practices while respecting the unique characteristics of the U.S. market and regulatory environment.

However, the literature on this aspect provides little material. While newer papers assume a causal relationship between organizations' sustainability performance and the use of social media profiles (Russo et al., 2022), other papers point out that social media is a rapidly evolving landscape. Changes in platform algorithms, user behavior, and emerging trends can quickly alter the effectiveness of communication strategies (Zhong & Wang, 2023).

Theoretical Foundations & State of Research

Sustainability, CSR & ESG

The concept of sustainability was first defined by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in December 1983 (United Nations, 1983). In its famous so-called "Brundtland Report," the WCED (1987) emphasizes that technology and the behavior of organizations of all kinds are the decisive factors for successful sustainability. In 2015, as mentioned above, the United Nations presented the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (DGs) (United Nations, 2018). A detailed presentation of the individual goals will be omitted here, as they will appear in the later analyses and are easily accessible via the cited sources.

CSR stands for "Corporate Social Responsibility" and pursues the idea that companies, with a particular focus on internal and external stakeholders, commit themselves to ecologically and ethically correct actions under the aspect of corporate success and are also guided by social values (Hopkins, 2012). CSR defines a company's obligations toward society (Carroll, 1971). Wood (1991) distinguishes between different levels of CSR. In this context, the institutional level of CSR is how a company legitimizes itself. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) defines CSR as the moral behavior of a company towards society (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 1999).

The term ESG stands for "Environmental, Social, Governance" and was popularly first used in a 2004 report entitled "Who Cares Wins," a joint initiative of financial institutions at the invitation of the United Nations (The Global Compact, 2004). It means that corporate financial goals go hand in hand with fulfilling environmental and social goals and responsible corporate governance (von Jürgensonn & Köster, 2021). As a term for a more holistic concept of sustainability, ESG seems to be gaining acceptance in recent years and replacing the previous use of the CSR concept in many areas. However, it is most frequently used concerning financial reporting (as recently also criticized in this context, as other papers in these conference proceedings show).

ESG Reporting and Corporate Accountability

Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) reporting has become a cornerstone for corporate accountability, enabling stakeholders to assess an organization's commitment to sustainable practices. In the absence of uniform global standards, companies rely on voluntary frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the Sustainability Accounting Standards Board (SASB) (Ioannou & Serafeim, 2019; Gibassier et al., 2020). The increasing emphasis on ESG reporting reflects a broader trend towards corporate transparency and responsibility.

Recent studies suggest that the integration of ESG factors into corporate strategies can significantly enhance transparency and foster stakeholder trust. For instance, Fornasari and Traversi (2024) argue that the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), supported by the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), have elevated sustainability from a compliance obligation to a strategic imperative. This shift underscores the potential of the European model to set global reporting standards (Fornasari & Traversi, 2024).

Also the question how to communicate externally and also internally as a company in addition and in combination with the official reporting on CSR and ESG issues has been rised often as well in practice and in the literature (Sievert et., 2021; Sievert et al., 2023).

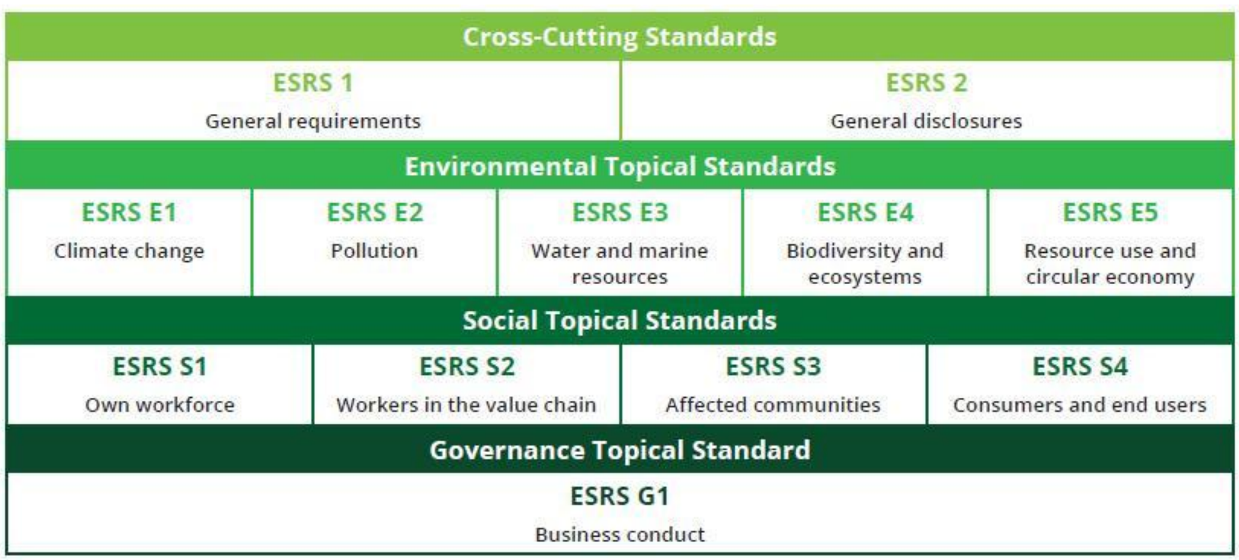
European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS)

The ESRS mandates comprehensive reporting on material sustainability impacts, risks, and opportunities, covering environmental, social, and governance issues. This regulatory framework has been instrumental in enhancing the transparency and comparability of ESG disclosures across European companies. As noted by Martínez-Torres (2024), despite efforts to standardize sustainability reporting, recent reductions in reporting requirements have sparked debates about the effectiveness of the ESRS in achieving transparency and comparability objectives (Martínez-Torres, 2024).

Moreover, the ESRS has been pivotal in aligning corporate reporting with the European Union's sustainable finance policies. By integrating ESG standards into investment strategies, financial institutions can better manage risks and identify opportunities, thereby promoting a sustainable economy (Adams & Abhayawansa, 2021). This comprehensive approach has been contrasted with the U.S. model, which lacks a centralized ESG reporting framework.

Figure 2

ESRS Standards as Basis for the CSRD Framework by Deloitte (2024)



ESG Reporting Disparities Between the U.S. and Europe

Significant disparities exist between ESG reporting practices in the U.S. and Europe, primarily due to differences in regulatory frameworks. While European companies adhere to structured and mandatory ESG reporting standards, U.S. companies rely heavily on voluntary disclosures driven by investor pressures. Some studies highlights that in the U.S., the absence of a standardized regulatory framework has resulted in a heterogeneous landscape of reporting methodologies, with companies adopting either global standards like GRI or industry-specific frameworks (Gopal & Pitts, 2024; Miranda, 2024; Miranda et al, 2023).

Furthermore, author authors observed that U.S. companies underreport ESG metrics compared to their European counterparts, particularly in terms of external verification of reports (Tînjală, 2015). The limited assurance of sustainability reports in the U.S. has raised concerns about the credibility and accuracy of the disclosed information.

However, all these remarks are valid until the end of 2024 and for the current legal situation. Current political settings as well as possible future developments are not taken into account here.

Economic Implications of ESG Reporting Standards

The adoption of ESG reporting standards has significant economic implications for businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). According to some studies, the implementation of European ESG standards has created conditions of uncertainty for SMEs due to the associated costs and compliance requirements (Hellriegel, 2025).

However, the integration of ESG factors into corporate financial reporting is increasingly seen as a strategic tool for enhancing corporate transparency and investor confidence. Zenkina (2024) emphasizes that new systems of ESG reporting standards, developed by the International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) and the European Financial Reporting Advisory Group (EFRAG, 2022), aim to generate coherent, comparable, and verifiable information on sustainable development (Zenkina, 2024). Effective corporate governance is within this context crucial for the successful implementation of ESG reporting practices.

Theoretical Summarizing and Research Questions

The elaboration in the theoretical part has clearly shown the importance of ESG and sustainability reporting today, but also the missing theoretical, empirical, and practical work on ESG communication, especially from NPOs/NGOs, and public sector institutions. As stakeholders increasingly seem to demand comprehensive ESG disclosures, companies must adapt to evolving standards to maintain credibility and trust. Based on these findings and the state of research, the following research questions are asked for this paper:

1. How do different sectors and organization sizes comply with ESRS requirements?
2. What variability exists in ESG reporting quality between for-profit and non-profit organizations of different types?
3. Are there specific thematic correlations that can be observed regarding CSR reporting?

Methodological Considerations

This study conducted a quantitative, comparative content analysis of n=225 different types of organizations' reports to examine CSR-reporting practices across various organizations (n=95). Among them were 32 ESG Reports, 23 CSR Reports, 36 Sustainability Reports, 89 Annual Reports, 21 Non-Financial Reports and 24 Websites. We aimed to systematically evaluate the content and quality of sustainability-related reports and documents produced by different types of entities, including DJI/NASDAQ companies, large non-listed companies, public sector organizations, churches, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and large family businesses. We included entities based on specific criteria, such as demographic factors, financial indicators, and organizational size. The organizations of our sample are subject to different legal frameworks and requirements. Thus, they follow quite different corporate communication strategies. We consider this by simultaneously assessing all possible types of reporting in our analysis and defining all possible kinds of reports as units of analysis (UA). Overall, our content analysis focused on six distinct types of documents as sources of information: A) ESG-Report, B) Sustainability Report, C) CSR-Report, D) Non-financial Report, E) Annual Report, F) Corporate Website.

This approach of *purposive sampling* allowed the authors to gain insights into the transparency, comprehensiveness, and quality of sustainability reporting practices within and across different sectors and to capture the diversity within the organizations` CSR reporting. Our final sample (selection units) comprised a total of n=95 organizations. A complete overview can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Industries and subgroups in the sample (n=95)

	Subgroups (n)					
Industries	Large NASDAQ Companies	Large Dow Jones Companies	Large Public Employers	Large NPOs/ NGOs	Large Churches	**Total**
Services	5	2	0	7	1	**15**
Technology	7	8	0	0	0	**15**
Manufacturing	10	3	0	0	0	**13**
Public Administration	0	0	10	0	0	**10**
Other	0	0	0	2	7	**9**
Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate	2	5	0	0	0	**7**
Transportation, Communications, Electric, Gas, and Sanitary Services	5	1	0	0	0	**6**
Nutrition Sector	3	2	0	0	0	**5**
Security, Software	2	2	0	1	0	**5**
Trade	3	2	0	0	0	**5**
Industry, occupational safety and consumer goods	0	4	0	0	0	**4**

Mining	0	1	0	0	0	**1**
Total	**37**	**30**	**10**	**10**	**8**	**95**

This comprehensive set of documents allowed us to examine the multifaceted aspects of sustainability reporting within each organization. Our codebook is applied to each existing type of report individually so that we can capture and evaluate all publicly available information about the companies under review. The collected data of each report is later merged to be able to make statements about the entirety of ESG reporting at the level of each selection unit (organizations).

Units of Analysis

The organizations of our sample are subject to different legal frameworks and requirements. Thus, they follow quite different corporate communication strategies. While some have elaborated strategies and published comprehensive reports, others are currently sorting themselves or following a wait-and-see strategy. We consider this by simultaneously assessing all possible types of reporting in our analysis and defining all possible types of reports as units of analysis (UA). Overall, our content analysis focused on six distinct types of documents as sources of information:

A) ESG-Report: Some companies might publish a written ESG report that exclusively deals with their ESG activities. It provides information on how the company manages its impact on the environment, how it treats its employees and stakeholders, and how it upholds ethical and responsible business practices.

B) Sustainability Report: A Sustainability Report is a document that provides information about a company's economic, environmental, and social performance, as well as its impact on society and the environment. Unlike an ESG report, which focuses on specific metrics related to environmental, social, and governance issues, a Sustainability Report provides a more comprehensive and holistic view of a company's sustainability practices, including its policies, initiatives, and goals. Sustainability Reports often include information on a company's long-term strategy for sustainable development and its efforts to mitigate environmental impacts, promote social responsibility, and ensure economic viability.

C) CSR-Report: A CSR report, or Corporate Social Responsibility report, is a document that outlines a company's efforts and initiatives to promote social responsibility, sustainability, and ethical business practices. The main difference between a CSR report and other types of reports, such as an ESG report or a sustainability report, is that a CSR report focuses specifically on a company's social responsibility initiatives and practices. While ESG and sustainability reports deal with a broader range of topics, a CSR report focuses more on a company's efforts to promote social responsibility and ethical business practices.

D) Non-financial Report: A non-financial report is a document that provides information about any of a company's non-financial performance. It typically includes information on the company's impact on society and the environment, its efforts to promote social responsibility, and its commitment to ethical and sustainable business practices. Non-financial reports are often used by stakeholders, investors, and the public to evaluate a company's performance and assess its impact on society and the environment.

E) *Annual Report:* An annual report is a comprehensive document that provides information on a company's financial performance and activities for a (fiscal) year. It includes information on the company's financial statements, such as income statements, balance sheets, and cash flow statements, as well as its operations, business strategy, and outlook for the future. However, some annual reports might also contain a section about a company's ESG activities.

F) *Corporate Website:* A corporate site, or institutional site, is an Internet site that presents a company, an institution or an organization to all its audiences and not only to its customers or users. Corporate websites might contain a section about the company's ESG activities.

This comprehensive set of documents allowed us to examine the multifaceted aspects of sustainability reporting within each organization. Our codebook is applied to each existing type of report individually so that we can capture and evaluate all publicly available information about the companies under review. The collected data of each report is later merged to be able to make statements about the entirety of ESG reporting at the level of each selection unit (organizations).

Table 2

Different Types of UAs in the sample (n=189)

Industries	**Total**
Annual (Financial) Report	89
Corporate Website	24
CSR Report	23
ESG Report	32
Non-Financial Report	21
Total	**189**

Category System

Our content analysis employed a comprehensive category system within the codebook, which included four different types of categories: First, we coded variables like the IDs of each of our ten coders and of the organizations. Additionally, the industry and the subgroup of organization (e.g., NASDAQ) have been identified. These categories have been labeled as formal categories (FC). Next, 32 quantitative categories (QC) have been created. These 32 categories encompassed various quantitative aspects of sustainability reporting. For example, we assessed the "overall size of reporting" (word count) and the "size" of each ESG topic. Additionally, we examined the "presence of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)" to gauge the organization's alignment with global sustainability objectives. In the next step, we captured data about the general quality (GQ) of the organization's communication comprising 16 categories focused on general quality indicators like "presence of materiality analysis" or "presence of ESG strategy" within the reports. Finally, some categories about the specific quality (SQ) of the organizations' CSR reporting have been created. These categories included five quality indicators that were specific to the comprehensibility of the reporting. For instance, we assessed the "quality of comprehensibility of ESG reporting" to determine the clarity and accessibility of sustainability information for stakeholders.

Intercoder Reliability

Ten different coders coded the material between September and December 2024 (graduate students from a German university). Coders have been trained on the codebook several times and were asked to share their understanding of the categories presented in our codebook via several meetings. All open questions of the coders have been posted to a shared online file and have been answered accordingly.

Table 3

Intraclass Correlation Coefficient

	Intraclass Correlation[a]	95% Confidence Interval		F Test with True Value 0			
		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.740[b]	.557	.855	6.706	38	38	<.001
Average Measures	.851[c]	.716	.922	6.706	38	38	<.001

Two-way mixed effects model where people effects are random and measures effects are fixed.
a. Type C intraclass correlation coefficients using a consistency definition. The between-measure variance is excluded from the denominator variance.
b. The estimator is the same, whether the interaction effect is present or not.
c. This estimate is computed assuming the interaction effect is absent, because it is not estimable otherwise.

The reliability of the ratings was assessed using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC), based on a two-way mixed-effects model with a consistency definition. The analysis yielded an ICC for single measures of $ICC = 0.740$, *95% CI [0.557, 0.855]*, and for average measures of $ICC = 0.851$, *95% CI [0.716, 0.922]*. The F-test indicated that the ICC was significantly greater than zero, $F(38, 38) = 6.706, p < .001$.

The ICC values indicate good reliability for both single and average measures, as they are around 0.80 (Koo & Li, 2016). The narrow confidence intervals further support these estimates. These results suggest that the ratings are highly consistent across coders.

Selected Results and Discussion

Environmental and Governance Reporting Disparities

The analysis of current ESG reports for this paper clearly shows that environmental factors are prioritized in reporting. Specifically, topics such as climate change mitigation and pollution and waste management receive the highest word counts in these reports. This highlights the significant importance organizations place on these environmental aspects to transparently showcase their sustainability efforts and meet the rising expectations of investors, regulators, and the public. The focus on these areas reflects the urgency with which companies are responding to global challenges related to climate change, indicating that environmental issues currently hold the highest priority within ESG disclosures.

Furthermore, it is evident that reporting on corporate ethics and organizational culture is particularly extensive in certain industries, especially in technology and manufacturing sectors. These industries dedicate substantial portions of their ESG reports to discussing their ethical principles, compliance mechanisms, and corporate culture. This extensive reporting likely stems from the fact that these sectors, due to their complex structures, innovative activities, and societal responsibilities, are under heightened scrutiny when it comes to stakeholder trust and adherence to ethical standards.

In contrast, non-profit organizations and public institutions tend to report significantly less on governance issues. The study results show that these organizations allocate considerably less space to governance topics in their ESG disclosures. This difference may be attributed to their different regulatory environments, less complex organizational structures, or a different prioritization of report content. While corporate entities often emphasize governance in their ESG reports, non-profits and public institutions tend to focus more on their social impact and service delivery, which is reflected in their reduced coverage of governance-related topics.

Overall, the study findings illustrate that ESG reporting exhibits a clear hierarchy of topics: environmental factors, especially climate change mitigation and pollution management, are at the forefront, while governance reporting varies significantly depending on the type of organization. These results underscore the importance organizations assign to different aspects of ESG and provide insight into which areas are currently emphasized in sustainability disclosures.

ESG reporting prioritizes environmental factors, with Climate Change Mitigation and Pollution & Waste Management receiving the highest word counts. Corporate Ethics and Culture is extensively reported in industries like technology and manufacturing, while non-profits and public institutions report significantly less on governance issues. The precise empirical data behind these finding will be published in Hellriegel, 2025.

Industry-Based Variability

The analysis of ESG reporting across various industries reveals notable differences in the extent to which organizations dedicate space to discussing environmental, social, and governance issues. Specifically, the Technology and Manufacturing sectors stand out for their extensive reporting on corporate ethics and related topics. In quantitative terms, these industries report approximately 10,692 words and 8,135 words, respectively, on issues related to corporate ethics, compliance, and organizational culture. This substantial word count indicates a high level of transparency and emphasis placed on ethical standards within these sectors, likely driven by their complex operational structures, rapid innovation cycles, and heightened stakeholder scrutiny. The detailed reporting in these industries suggests that they recognize the importance of demonstrating ethical integrity and responsible governance as part of their broader sustainability strategies, especially given the potential reputational and regulatory risks associated with their activities.

In contrast, public administration bodies and non-profit organizations tend to allocate significantly fewer words to ESG issues, particularly in the areas of corporate ethics and governance. Their reports are markedly shorter, reflecting a different approach to ESG disclosure that may be influenced by their organizational missions, regulatory environments, and stakeholder expectations. These organizations often prioritize social service delivery and public accountability over extensive ethical disclosures, which is consistent with their core functions and resource allocations.

To statistically assess whether these observed differences in reporting size are significant across industries, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test was conducted. The results yielded an F-value of 0.0027, with a p-value less than 0.05, indicating that the variations in the length of ESG reports among different industry groups are statistically significant. This means that the differences in reporting volume are unlikely to be due to random chance and instead reflect genuine variations in how industries approach ESG disclosure. The low F-value suggests that the industry type has a meaningful impact on the extent of ESG reporting, with certain sectors like Technology and Manufacturing producing much more comprehensive disclosures compared to public administration and non-profits.

These findings underscore the importance of industry-specific factors in shaping ESG reporting practices. The significant differences identified through the ANOVA test highlight that organizations' reporting behaviors are closely aligned with their operational complexity, stakeholder expectations, and regulatory pressures. Understanding these variations can help policymakers, investors, and stakeholders better interpret ESG disclosures and assess organizational commitments to sustainability and ethical standards across different sectors. The precise empirical data behind these finding will also be published in Hellriegel, 2025.

Category-Based Variability

As can be seen in Figure 3, the study's findings reveal notable sectoral disparities in ESG reporting practices, with publicly traded corporations demonstrating significantly higher reporting quantities compared to non-profit organizations and religious institutions. Specifically, publicly traded companies tend to produce more comprehensive and extensive disclosures, often dedicating a larger volume of words and detailed information to their ESG activities. This difference can be attributed to several factors, including stricter regulatory requirements, greater stakeholder pressure, and the need to maintain investor confidence in the financial markets. In contrast, non-profits and religious institutions generally report less extensively, possibly due to their different organizational missions, less rigorous regulatory oversight, or resource constraints.

These organizations often focus more on their social impact and service delivery rather than detailed governance or environmental disclosures. The data underscores that the sector in which an organization operates significantly influences the scope and depth of its ESG reporting, with publicly traded firms leading in transparency and disclosure volume. This sectoral disparity highlights the importance of considering organizational context when evaluating ESG disclosures and suggests that regulatory and stakeholder expectations play a crucial role in shaping reporting behaviors across different types of organizations.

Figure 3

ESG Reporting Size (Total Word Count) by Category and Total Number of Cases

Thematic Correlations

Finally, it is particularly interesting to examine some of the thematic correlations presented in Figure 4, as they provide valuable insights into how different ESG topics are interconnected within corporate disclosures. The correlation analysis conducted in this study revealed notable associations between various ESG themes, highlighting patterns in how companies address these issues. For instance, there is a strong positive correlation between Climate Change Mitigation and Pollution & Waste Management, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.81$.

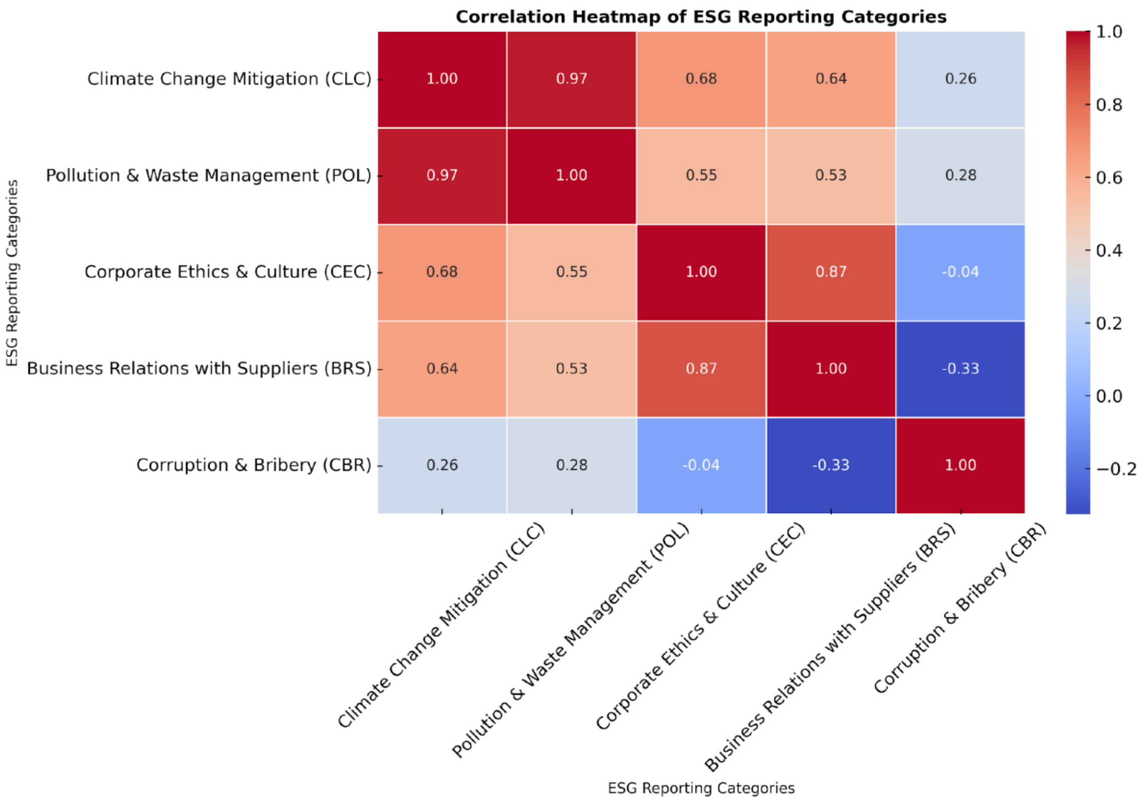
This high value indicates that organizations actively working on climate-related initiatives are also likely to emphasize pollution control and waste management practices in their disclosures. Such a relationship suggests that companies recognize the interconnected nature of environmental issues and tend to address them collectively in their sustainability reporting. Conversely, the analysis showed weaker associations for categories like Supplier Relations, with correlation coefficients less than 0.2 ($r < 0.2$).

These weaker correlations may reflect a lack of emphasis or consistency in reporting supply chain issues across different organizations. Overall, these findings underscore the tendency of companies to focus more on certain environmental issues, such as climate change and pollution, while other areas like supply chain management receive comparatively less attention or are addressed independently.

Cronbach's Alpha was computed to assess internal consistency across ESG reporting categories ($\alpha = 0.778$), indicating moderate reliability but highlighting variability in disclosure standards.

Figure 4

Correlation Between Major ESG Topics



Conclusion and Future Research

This study highlights several key findings regarding ESG reporting practices in the United States. Firstly, environmental topics dominate ESG disclosures, with a particular emphasis on climate change and emissions reduction efforts. This indicates that organizations prioritize environmental sustainability, possibly due to regulatory pressures or stakeholder expectations. Secondly, there are notable sectoral disparities: publicly traded corporations tend to produce higher-quality ESG reports compared to non-profit organizations and religious institutions. This suggests that financial incentives, regulatory requirements, or resource availability may influence the depth and rigor of ESG disclosures across different organizational types.

Statistical analysis confirms that the size and scope of ESG reporting vary significantly across industries, underscoring the heterogeneity in reporting practices. These industry differences point to the absence of standardized reporting frameworks, which could hinder comparability and transparency. Additionally, while many organizations reference Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within their reports, only a few provide comprehensive insights into their specific contributions toward achieving these global objectives. This limited integration indicates a gap between mere acknowledgment and substantive reporting on SDG-related impacts.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that ESG reporting quality in the U.S. at least during the analyzation period given here is highly variable and influenced by organizational type and industry sector. The significant industry differences emphasize the at least theoretical need for regulatory measures to promote consistency and comparability in ESG disclosures. However, political developments will show how fare this is possible: In recent years, ESG issues have on one hand become increasingly mandatory, particularly in Europe. On the other hand, there is a countermovement here: one example would be international private equity funds, which used to place great emphasis on such issues and are now distancing themselves from them to some extent. Similarly, small and medium-sized companies in Europe could be cited as examples that consider the administrative burden of reporting on certain issues to be excessive and would like to see bureaucracy simplified in this area. Finally, there are general political developments in some countries that would like to subordinate many ESG issues very clearly only to “pure” economic considerations or perceive them as even not important at all in a different worldview.

Future research should therefore investigate how regulatory changes might influence ESG reporting practices and explore strategies to harmonize standards between the U.S. and Europe. Moreover, examining the effect of ESG disclosures on stakeholder perceptions—potentially through social media sentiment analysis—could provide valuable insights into public reception of corporate sustainability efforts. These results underscore the importance of developing standardized ESG disclosure frameworks to enhance transparency, comparability, and accountability in corporate sustainability reporting, aligning with the recommendations of Edgley et al. (2015). Given the diverse political and cultural contexts across different regions, further studies should also consider cross-continental differences and the challenges faced by communication professionals operating in complex political environments.

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Can AI-Assisted Apologies Foster Trust and Forgiveness? The Role of Warmth and Competence in Crisis Communication Tone

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of AI-driven apology messages during organizational crises using a 4 (authorship attribution: AI, human, mixed, control) × 2 (relational tone: competence, warmth) factorial design. Results show that apologies attributed to humans are perceived as more sincere, leading to higher trust and forgiveness, whereas AI-attributed statements increase perceptions of machine heuristics, reducing trust and forgiveness intentions. A warm tone moderates the relationship between authorship attribution and perceived sincerity, which amplifies forgiveness and trust for human-attributed apologies. However, warmth does not significantly moderate the impact of machine heuristics on audience perceptions and forgiveness intention. These findings emphasize the importance of human-centric elements in crisis communication, particularly in corporate ability-based crises, where audiences closely evaluate authenticity and functional competence. They also underscore the challenges of addressing cognitive biases that can erode trust and forgiveness in high-stakes scenarios.

Keywords: Authorship attribution; Crisis communication; Stereotype content model; Artificial intelligence (AI); Forgiveness; Machine heuristic

Can AI-Assisted Apologies Foster Trust and Forgiveness? The Role of Warmth and Competence in Crisis Communication Tone

Introduction

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) continues to advance, with its adoption expanding rapidly across diverse domains. However, its application in crisis communication has sometimes generated controversy (e.g., Giebelhausen & Poehlman, 2024). These negative reactions stem from professional norms emphasizing that crisis communication must be sincere, authentic, and sensitive to stakeholders' emotions and concerns. Nevertheless, as GenAI advances, its integration into tasks like drafting apologies is becoming inevitable, with AI-generated content increasingly comparable to human-authored work. For instance, a recent blinded experiment evaluating the quality of AI- and human-authored physics essays found no significant differences in scores, underscoring the growing parity between AI and human authorship (Yeadon et al., 2024). This parallels trends in other domains, such as programming and data analytics, where AI-generated solutions have become indispensable for experienced professionals by automating routine tasks and enabling focus on complex, high-value work (Bughin, 2024). Similarly, it is foreseeable that seasoned public relations professionals will increasingly adopt AI-generated or AI-assisted strategies for crisis response, leveraging its efficiency to handle routine aspects while applying their expertise to maintain quality and contextual appropriateness. Further supporting this trajectory, Park and Kim (2023) examined GenAI's capability to produce high-stakes CEO apology statements that varied in writing styles and rhetorical strategies. They found that AI-generated statements achieved a moderate level of alignment with real-world counterparts, showcasing potential in mimicking human-like narratives. However, their study also identified limitations, particularly in GenAI's ability to fully capture cultural and emotional subtleties essential in building trust and authenticity.

Previous research in crisis communication has examined audience responses to crisis apology statements attributed to either human or AI sources, revealing that identical statements attributed to a human are more likely to elicit trust and forgiveness intentions than those attributed to AI (Lim et al., 2025). While these findings highlight the significance of authorship attribution, little is known about how message tone interacts with attribution to shape audience perceptions and their willingness to forgive. Tone can play an important role in the effectiveness of crisis communication, significantly influencing how individuals perceive and respond to messages (Kim et al., 2022). However, the interaction between message tone and authorship attribution remains underexplored, leaving a gap in understanding how these factors jointly affect outcomes. This research aims to address this gap by advancing theoretical insights and providing empirical evidence on the effective use of GenAI in crisis communication to enhance perceptions of sincerity, trust, and, ultimately, forgiveness.

Theoretical Background

The Importance of Warmth and Competence in Apologies for Corporate Ability Crises

Crisis communication is crucial for protecting organizational reputations during crises, and apologies are among the most effective strategies for addressing stakeholder concerns. Apologies are especially significant in corporate ability crises, such as data breaches (Bentley & Ma, 2020; Lim et al., 2025; Moon & Rhee, 2012), product recalls (Yakut & Bayraktaroglu, 2021), or industrial accidents (Coombs & Holladay, 2008), where stakeholders demand both accountability and solutions. Much research examining the role of apologies has focused on comparing their effectiveness to other strategies (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2008). In contrast, Bentley and Ma (2020) explored how structural components of apologies—such as expressions of remorse, acknowledgment of responsibility, and reparations—influence post-crisis consumer behavior, including negative word-of-mouth and purchase intentions. However, the stylistic aspects of apologies, particularly their tone, remain underexplored, despite their potential to interact with other factors like the message's source. Specifically, the tone of an apology, such as the balance between warmth and competence, could play a critical role in influencing its effectiveness, particularly in corporate ability crises. In cases such as cruise wrecks, plane crashes, food contamination, product recalls, and data breaches, the affected public or victims expect companies to demonstrate both empathy and competence in managing the situation. A warm tone addresses psychological concerns and builds emotional connections with victims, while a competent tone reinforces the organization's ability to resolve the crisis and prevent future occurrences.

The challenge lies in determining whether AI-attributed apologies, which previous research has found to be less effective than human-attributed apologies, can achieve more favorable outcomes by incorporating a high level of warmth compared to competence. Building on prior studies on authorship attribution effects in crisis communication, this research seeks to expand understanding of the potential theoretical mechanisms that could enhance the impact of AI-attributed crisis messages when they employ a warmth-focused tone over a competence-focused tone. This inquiry holds practical significance, as GenAI possesses the capability to craft messages that effectively convey warmth as well as competence. To study the theoretical mechanism driving this interaction effect, it is first necessary to review the traditional authorship attribution effects before exploring the interplay between tone and authorship attribution. The following section provides a review of relevant research to date.

Authorship Attribution and Machine Heuristics

In Who Wrote This?, Baron (2023) acknowledges the growing capabilities of AI to produce high-quality content and emulate human writing to a reasonable degree. However, she cautions that the mere knowledge of AI authorship can trigger skepticism and biases, even when the content is indistinguishable from human-authored work. While Baron focuses on the ethical and educational implications of AI authorship, Sundar and his colleagues (Sundar, 2020; Sundar & Kim, 2019) provide a theoretical rationale for these observations through his work on machine heuristics. Sundar and Liao (2023) argues that individuals rely on cognitive shortcuts to evaluate AI-generated content, often associating AI with a lack of naturalness and emotional depth, which diminishes trust in AI-authored messages for a certain context and type of tasks.

The machine heuristic leads people to automatically associate AI-generated content with characteristics such as artificiality, lack of emotional depth, and rigidity, often resulting in negative evaluations of credibility and authenticity (Sundar, 2020). For example, when individuals are made aware that a piece of content is machine-generated, they tend to perceive it as less trustworthy, less authentic, and less emotionally resonant compared to human-authored content (Sundar & Kim, 2019). Similarly, Longoni et al. (2022) showed that news labeled as AI-generated was perceived as less accurate, even when factually correct, due to reduced trust in AI authorship.

Cognitive biases and general perceptions influence how people attribute characteristics to machines, such as speed, objectivity, and precision (Sundar, 2008). Depending on the task at hand, this mental shortcut influences positive and negative evaluations of machine performance in both machine-mediated and human-machine communication contexts. For example, since machines lack human attributes, people may have lower expectations, confidence, and trust in it to perform a certain output compared to a human (Yang & Sundar, 2024). Building on the discussion of machine heuristic in evaluating AI-authored content, we posit the following hypothesis:

H1: Participants in the AI-attributed apology condition will report stronger machine heuristic perceptions compared to participants in the human-attributed apology condition.

Perceived Sincerity in Apology Statement

Authenticity theory provides another explanation for AI-authorship in content evaluation, as individuals often perceive AI-generated communications as less authentic than those created by humans (Kirk & Givi, 2025). Authenticity in persuasive communication is closely tied to the perceived sincerity of the content. Messages attributed to AI, particularly in contexts like apologies during a crisis, are often judged as lacking authenticity and sincerity (Lim et al., 2025). This perceived inauthenticity may lead individuals to view AI-authored content as manipulative or disingenuous, which can negatively affect trust and attitudes toward the organization behind the message. Previous research shows that individuals tend to rate AI-generated communications as less trustworthy and authentic compared to human-written counterparts, particularly in emotionally sensitive contexts like crisis communication (Glikson & Asscher, 2023; Kim et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2025). Building on previous research findings about the impact of AI authorship on perceptions of sincerity, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Participants in the AI-attributed apology condition will perceive the statement as less sincere than participants in the human-attributed apology condition.

The Role of Machine Heuristic in Forgiveness and Trust (Mediation Model)

Research has consistently highlighted public skepticism toward AI-mediated communication, particularly in emotionally sensitive contexts like crisis apologies. Glikson and Asscher (2023) found that awareness of AI authorship diminished perceptions of apology authenticity and reduced willingness to forgive. Similarly, Kirk and Givi (2025) demonstrated that emotional content attributed to AI elicited moral disgust, leading to lower consumer loyalty and less positive word of mouth. Lim et al. (2025) further showed that AI-generated apology statements were perceived as less empathetic and sincere than human-generated ones, which negatively impacted forgiveness intention and trust in the organization. These findings imply a persistent public bias against AI in scenarios requiring emotional resonance and trust. Zhou et al. (2023) argued that users often perceive AI agents as mechanical and logic-driven, limiting their ability to handle emotional tasks. This gap in relational quality is particularly relevant in crisis situations, where trust and sincerity are vital for effective crisis management (Zhou et al., 2024).

When an apology is attributed to an AI system, audiences may activate a negative machine heuristic, perceiving the message as generated without deliberation or direct involvement from the organization's top management and decision-makers. Such perceptions can diminish trust and reduce intentions to forgive the organization, as individuals may question the company's genuine commitment to addressing the situation or fostering meaningful connections with stakeholders on a human level.

This explanation provides a theoretical perspective on the potential impact of perceived AI authorship in achieving the ultimate behavioral objectives of protecting organizational trust and increasing forgiveness intentions. Specifically, it suggests that these outcomes are mediated through the activation of machine heuristics. We posit that machine heuristic perceptions mediate the relationship between AI authorship and audience evaluations, influencing trust in the organization and willingness to forgive. In other words, this research assumes that machine heuristics introduce bias into person perception and information processing, potentially rendering

AI-attributed apology statements less effective in mitigating crises. Based on this framework, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: The AI-attributed apology condition will have a negative indirect effect on (a) forgiveness intention and (b) trust through machine heuristic perceptions.

The Role of Perceived Sincerity in Forgiveness and Trust (Mediation Model)

Perceptions of sincerity in apologies play an important role in building trust and ultimately increasing forgiveness intention. Apologies perceived as insincere led to individuals' withholding forgiveness, while sincere apologies resulted in forgiveness. A few studies offer empirical evidence for such assumptions. For instance, Choi and Mitchell (2022) found that perceived sincerity in YouTuber apologies was a strong predictor of forgiveness, underscoring the centrality of sincerity in effective apologies. Lim et al. (2025) explored AI versus human attribution influenced the effectiveness of crisis apologies, focusing on trust, forgiveness, and perceived sincerity. They found that human-attributed apologies were perceived as more sincere and empathetic, resulting in higher levels of trust and forgiveness intentions compared to AI-attributed apologies. Building on this understanding, we posit the following mediation hypothesis:

H4: The human-attributed apology condition will have a positive indirect effect on (a) forgiveness intention and (b) trust through perceived sincerity of the statement.

The Role of Warmth versus Competence Tone in the Mediation Model (Mod-Med Model)

The tone of messaging plays a crucial role in influencing public perceptions and fostering relationships during crises. A growing body of research (Jeong, 2024; Kim et al., 2015; Nazione & Perrault, 2019; Oh & Ki, 2024; Zhang & Gosline, 2023) has investigated how different relational tones influence public evaluations of organizations in crisis situations. For example, Nazione and Perrault (2019) investigated whether a personal versus professional tone in corporate apologies during crises improved positive attitudes towards the company. The stereotype content model (SCM) offers a valuable framework for understanding how individuals evaluate others, including organizations, based on two primary relational tones: warmth and competence (Fiske, 2018; Fiske et al., 2007). Warmth encompasses qualities like friendliness, trustworthiness, kindness, and morality, while competence reflects attributes such as cleverness, efficiency, and the ability to achieve goals (Fiske et al., 2007).

Warmth and competence are particularly influential in crises where stakeholders infer corporate culpability or evaluate product failures, as these dimensions affect perceptions of an organization's responsibility and its ability to address and rectify harm effectively (Barbarossa et al., 2018; Xie & Peng, 2009). During crises, warmth- and competence-focused apologies play distinct roles in forming stakeholder perceptions of an organization. Warmth-focused apologies highlight the organization's good intentions, empathy, and concern for stakeholders, while competence-focused apologies emphasize its ability to manage the crisis effectively and prevent future occurrences (Jeong, 2024). Warmth has been shown to reduce blame attributions, fostering more favorable attitudes toward the company (Barbarossa et al., 2018). Xie and Peng (2009) also found that warmth-focused messages, which emphasizes empathy and personal concern, are often more effective in fostering trust and forgiveness than competence-focused messages that stress professionalism and expertise Conversely, competence is more effective in product-harm crises, where stakeholders scrutinize the organization's functional capabilities to resolve the issue effectively (Jeong, 2024). Xie and Peng (2009) found that organizations can repair trust through demonstrating both competence and genuine concern for stakeholders.

The role of relational tone become even more critical when organizations use generative AI to develop and write formal apology statements. AI-generated messages often face challenges in conveying emotional depth required for crisis communication. Zhang and Gosline (2023) found that human-like cues in AI communication, such as friendly language and expressive tone, are significant in improving perceptions of communication quality, suggesting that relational tone is one of the key factors to reduce public skepticism toward AI-authored content. Similarly,

Although prior research has explored the effects of machine heuristics and relational tone in various contexts, no direct study has examined how different tones in apologies interact with authorship attribution to influence crisis evaluation outcomes, such as trust and forgiveness intention. Cao et al. (2024) found that machine heuristics, influenced by the level of anthropomorphism in chatbots, significantly affect willingness to forgive. Their findings suggest that human-like tones could mitigate the negative effects of machine heuristics by fostering perceptions of authenticity and emotional engagement. Jeong (2024) further demonstrated that relational tone—specifically warmth versus competence—plays a moderating role in the relationship between crisis type and corporate attitudes. She found that competence perceptions are more salient in performance-related crises, while warmth perceptions are particularly critical in addressing ethical transgressions. Together, these findings underscore the importance of tailoring relational tones to the specific nature of a crisis to manage public attitudes effectively.

Building on these insights, this study investigates how relational tone moderates the mediating effects of machine heuristics and perceived sincerity on the relationship between authorship attribution and crisis evaluation outcomes. We propose that warmth-focused tones can mitigate the negative effects of machine heuristics by reducing perceptions of artificiality and enhancing the emotional depth of AI-attributed apologies. Therefore, we hypothesize the following moderated mediation effects:

H5: The negative indirect effect of the AI-attributed apology condition on (a) forgiveness intention and (b) trust through machine heuristic perceptions will be moderated by the warmth of the statement's tone. Specifically, a warm tone will attenuate the negative indirect effects of AI-attributed apology on (a) forgiveness intention and (b) trust through machine heuristic.

H6: The positive indirect effect of the human-attributed apology condition on (a) forgiveness intention and (b) trust through perceived sincerity will be moderated by the warmth of the statement's tone. Specifically, a warm tone will amplify the positive indirect effects of human-attributed apology on (a) forgiveness intention and (b) trust through perceived sincerity.

Methods

The study utilized an online experiment conducted via Qualtrics, in which participants were presented with a simulated press release apology statement from a fictitious retail company, "SmartShop," addressing a data breach crisis. Participants were recruited in October 2024 through Prolific Academic, an online research platform, based on specific eligibility criteria: residence in the United States and a representative sample reflecting U.S. Census data for sex, age, and ethnicity. After accessing the IRB-approved Qualtrics survey, participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions in a 4 (authorship attribution: 100% AI, 100% human, mixed, control) × 2 (relational tone: competence, warmth) factorial design. The control condition is modeled after the baseline control condition employed in Zhang et al.'s (2023) research. We provided the samples of stimuli through a data repository (Appendix_Data, 2025).

Participants

An a priori power analysis determined that a sample size of at least 279 participants would be required to achieve 95% power to detect the two-way interaction between creator attribution and relational tone ($df = 3$), assuming $\alpha = .05$ and a medium effect size ($f = .25$). In total, 400 participants completed our study. We excluded 59 participants who provided duplicate responses and did not finish the questions. Thus, the final sample consisted of 341 participants.

Respondents had a mean age of 45.64 ($SD = 15.53$) and relatively even divide in terms of self-reported gender (female = 172; male = 161; non-binary = 7; prefer not to say = 1). In terms of ethnicity/race, the sample included about 71.3% White/Caucasian, 14.7% Black/African American, 6.5% Hispanic, and 5.6% Asian/Asian American. Participants were paid 2 dollars for their completion of the study.

Experimental Stimuli and Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight experimental conditions and were asked to read an apology statement from the fictitious retailer brand, SmartShop, regarding a data breach incident. In the apology statement, the organization addressed the issue, apologized, and outlined the steps the company is going to take to rectify the situation and prevent similar incidents in the future. This apology statement was generated using a GenAI model, which was trained to emulate the key elements of the original apology statement closely. The original statement was issued in 2014 by Target Corporation in response to a data breach incident. To explore the impact of authorship attribution, we used a simulated, realistic web browser AI detection plugin. This plugin displayed the percentage of AI use detected in the fictious apology statement, simulating consumer perceptions of AI-generated content in the context of a corporate data breach scandal. Participants in the 100% AI-written condition ($n = 85$) were shown an AI detection plugin display with an image icon labeled "AI" and the text "100% AI—We are highly confident this text was generated by AI"; those in the 100% human-written condition ($n = 86$) were shown an image icon labeled "Human" with the text "100% Human—We are highly confident this text is entirely human;" and those in the mixed AI and human-written condition ($n = 86$) were shown an image icon labeled "Mix" with the text "92% Mixed, 5% Human, 3% AI—We are highly confident this text is a mix of human and AI" (See samples from Appendix_Data, 2025). Additionally, to manipulate perceptions of the relational tone, we varied the tone of the apology statement presented to participants. While the overall structure of the statement remained consistent across conditions, key phrases were adjusted to emphasize either a warmth ($n = 169$) or competence ($n = 172$) relational tone. It took participants approximately 10 minutes to complete the survey, and the questionnaire addressed the following measures.

Measurements

Machine heuristic. Four items of this measure were adapted from P. Hu et al. (2021). Participants were asked on a 7-point Likert scale to indicate their agreement with the statements such as “The company’s statement reads like it was written by a machine” and “The statement sound like those of a machine” ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.54$, Cronbach’s alpha = .94).

Perceived sincerity. We used four items adapted from (Y. Hu et al., 2021; Wenzel et al., 2017) and Hu et al. (2021). Participants evaluated the statement on whether the company’s statement seemed sincere, respectful, heartfelt, and genuine. A 7-point Likert scale was used for evaluation, where 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.39$, $\alpha = .95$).

Forgiveness intention. Respondents were asked to rate their responses on a 7-point Likert scale using five items adapted from a forgiveness scale that assessed both relationship maintenance intention and emotional forgiveness (Babin et al., 2021; Tsarenko & Tojib, 2015). Sample statements include “I will maintain my relationship with SmartShop despite the data breach incident" and "I am willing to give SmartShop a chance to regain my trust" (M = 4.91, SD = 1.35, α = .95).

Trust on the organization. Trust was measured using a well-established scale developed by Hon and Grunig (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Participants rated their agreement with nine statements on a 7-point Likert scale such as, "I am willing to let this company make decisions for people like me" and "Customers like me can feel confident about the company's ability to meet customer expectations from the relationship" (M = 4.66, SD = 1.19, α = .94).

Manipulation Check

To assess the manipulation of creator attribution, we asked participants to respond to a question about who they believed had written the statement among the following options: "fully written by a human", "fully written by a machine (AI)", "partially written or assisted by machine (AI)", or "not sure". Chi-square test result indicated a significant association between the experimental conditions and participant's' responses, $\chi^2(9)$ = 369.24, p < .001. To test the manipulation of perceived competence of the apology statement, we asked participants three questions (adapted from Fiske et al., 2002) on a 5-point Likert scale, including items such as "It sounds confident" and "It conveys that the company is capable of managing the issue" (α = .86). An independent samples t-test indicated a significant difference between the two experimental conditions. Participants in the competence relational tone condition perceived the statement as more competent (M = 3.90, SD = .66), than participants in the warmth condition (M = 3.63, SD = .84), t (339) = -3.26, p = .001. To test the manipulation of perceived warmth in the apology statement, participants responded to four questions (Fiske et al., 2002) on a 5-point Likert scale, including items such as "It feels warm" and "It sounds friendly" (α = .91). An independent samples t-test revealed a significant difference between the two experimental conditions. Participants in the warmth relational tone condition rated the statement warmer (M = 3.59, SD = .94), than participants in the competence condition (M = 3.04, SD = .85), t (339) = 5.73, p < .001. Therefore, all three manipulations were successful.

Results

Prior to testing **H1** and **H2**, we ran two-way ANOVAs to analyze the effects of experimental manipulations on machine heuristic and perceived sincerity. The ANOVA results indicated that authorship attribution had significant main effects on both forgiveness intention (F (3, 333) = 5.28, p = .001, partial η^2 = .93), and trust on the organization (F (3, 333) = 5.45, p = .001, partial η^2 = .94) (see for results). Two independent-sample t-tests were conducted to test **H1** and **H2**. As predicted, participants in the AI-attributed condition rated higher levels of machine heuristic [M_{AI} = 4.25 (SD = 1.69), M_{Human} = 3.03 (SD = 1.34), t (169) = 5.22, p < .001] and lower levels of perceived sincerity [M_{AI} = 3.03 (SD = 1.34), M_{Human} = 4.25 (SD = 1.69), t (169) = -5.63, p < .001] than those in the human-attributed condition. Therefore, **H1** and **H2** were supported.

To test **H3** and **H4**, we first conducted ANCOVAs, which is a good way to demonstrate mediation implications prior to testing it with a more rigorous path analysis (Hayes & Preacher, 2014). We entered machine heuristic and perceived sincerity as covariates to examine the potential mediation for the relationship between authorship attribution and two outcome variables, forgiveness intention and trust on the organization (see **Table 1** for descriptive statistics). When the ANCOVA was conducted with machine heuristic and perceived sincerity used as a covariate on two outcome variables, the significant main effects disappeared. Results in **Table 2** indicate that both machine heuristic and perceived sincerity were significant mediators. A post hoc analysis using Tukey's b test revealed that the mean scores for both outcome variables were not statistically different among the human, mixed, and unknown groups. However, a statistically significant difference was observed between the AI and human groups. Therefore, we focus further analyses solely on the comparison between these two groups.

To further demonstrate the mediating effects of machine heuristic and perceived sincerity in **H3** and **H4**, as well as the conditional indirect effects of relational tone (warmth and competence) on trust and forgiveness intentions (**H5** and **H6)**, we carried out four moderated mediation analyses using Mplus 8. Indirect effects were tested using 95% bootstrapped confidence intervals (CI) based on 10,000 resamples. Authorship attribution of the apology statement was coded using indicator coding, with human condition serving as the reference category. Relational tone of the apology statement was also coded using indicator coding, with competence serving as the reference category.

In **H3**, we hypothesized the AI-attributed apology condition will have negative indirect effect on intention to forgive and trust through machine heuristic perceptions. Results showed that authorship attribution had a significant total indirect effect on forgiveness intention (b = -.82, 95% CI = [-1.32, -.44]), and trust (b = -.71, 95% CI = [-1.17, -.38]). Specifically, participants in the AI condition showed stronger machine heuristic perception compared to those in the human condition, β = .32, 95% CI = [.14, .49]. Additionally, machine heuristic negatively predicted forgiveness intention, β = -.42, 95% CI = [-.56, -.26], and trust, β = -.41, 95% CI = [-.54, -.27] (**Table 3**). Therefore, **H3a** and **H3b** were supported.

In **H4**, we hypothesized the human-attributed apology condition will have a positive indirect effect on intention to forgive and trust through perceived sincerity of the statement. Results showed that the authorship attribution had a significant total indirect effect on forgiveness intention (b = -1.28, 95% CI = [-1.79, -.83]), and trust (b = -1.35, 95% CI = [-1.87, -.89]). Specifically, participants in the AI-attributed authorship condition perceived less sincere compared to those in the human-attributed authorship condition, β = -.24, 95% CI = [-.41, -.07]. Perceived sincerity, in turn, positively predicted forgiveness intention, β = .61, 95% CI = [.48, .72], and trust, β = .72, 95% CI = [.60, .81]. Therefore, **H4a** and **H4b** were supported.

In **H5**, we hypothesized a warm tone would attenuate the negative indirect effects of AI-attributed apology on (a) forgiveness intention and (b) trust through machine heuristic. The analysis did not reveal a significant conditional indirect effect of relational tone on the mediated relationship between authorship attribution and forgiveness intention (b = -.12, 95% CI = [-.50, .17]) and trust (b = -0.11, 95% CI = [-.44, .14]). While machine heuristic mediated the relationship between authorship attribution and both forgiveness intention and trust, relational tone did not significantly moderate these relationships. This indicates that a warm tone did not significantly attenuate the negative impact of AI-attributed apology condition on machine heuristic perception. Therefore, both **H5a** and **H5b** were not supported.

In **H6**, we posited that a warm tone would amplify the positive indirect effects of human-attributed apology on (a) forgiveness intention and (b) trust through perceived sincerity. The results revealed that relational tone significantly moderated the indirect effect of authorship attribution on both forgiveness intention (b = -.50, 95% CI = [-.98, -.06]) and trust (b = -.53, 95% CI = [-1.03, -.06]). Specifically, participants in the AI-attributed authorship condition reported lower perceived sincerity when the relational tone was warm, β = -.27, 95% CI = [-.41, -.07]. Furthermore, perceived sincerity had significant positive effect on both forgiveness intention (β = .61, 95% CI = [.48, .72]) and trust (β = .72, 95% CI = .60, .81]). These findings indicate that relational tone significantly moderates the relationship between authorship attribution and perceived sincerity, which, in turn, influences forgiveness intention and trust. The results suggest that the warm tone can amplify the positive impact of human-attributed condition on perceived sincerity, ultimately positively affecting forgiveness intention and trust. Therefore, both **H6a** and **H6b** were supported (see **Table3, Figure 2** and **Figure 3**).

Discussion

The current research examined the effects of authorship attribution (AI vs. human) and relational tone (warmth vs. competence) in apologies on forgiveness intentions and trust within the context of a corporate ability-driven crisis. Several important results emerged. First, participants in the AI-attributed apology condition reported significantly higher levels of machine heuristic and lower levels of perceived sincerity compared to the human-attributed condition (see **H1** and **H2** results). These findings confirm that AI authorship activates negative biases related to perceptions of artificiality and inauthenticity. Consistent with our predictions for **H3** and **H4**, we found a negative indirect effect of machine heuristic perceptions and a positive indirect effect of perceived sincerity on trust and forgiveness intentions.

Regarding the moderating role of relational tone in the mediating effect, contrary to expectations, a warm tone did not significantly attenuate the negative indirect effect of AI-attributed apologies on forgiveness intentions and trust (See **H5** results). However, when examining the moderating role of a warm tone in amplifying the positive indirect effects of human-attributed apologies on forgiveness intentions and trust through perceived sincerity, we found statistically significant results (see **H6** results). These findings demonstrate that warmth enhances perceptions of sincerity, making human-authored messages more effective in fostering trust and forgiveness.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

These findings contribute to the growing body of research on AI-driven communication, crisis management, and stereotype content model (SCM). First, the results reaffirm the significance of machine heuristics as a theoretical framework for understanding how audiences process assumed AI-authored content. The activation of machine heuristics introduces biases that negatively influence perceptions of sincerity, forgiveness, and trust, even when AI-generated content meets high technical standards. Notably, this research provides the first empirical evidence demonstrating the potential negative mediating effect of machine heuristics on crisis evaluations. From a practical perspective, these findings offer valuable insights for practitioners incorporating GenAI into crisis communication strategies. A key takeaway is the critical need to address and overcome the audience's biases associated with machine heuristics to achieve acceptance and desired behavioral outcomes, such as fostering forgiveness intentions.

Second, the study integrated the SCM into the discussion of relational tone and demonstrated how warmth and competence function as critical dimensions of corporate apologies. The findings suggest that warmth is particularly effective in amplifying the positive effects of human-authored messages, which aligns well with prior research that asserted the importance of tailoring communication styles to specific crises.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study provides valuable insights into the interplay between authorship attribution and relational tone; however, several limitations warrant consideration and suggest directions for future research.

First, while the findings demonstrate that warm tones enhance the effectiveness of human-attributed apologies, they appear insufficient to fully counteract the negative biases associated with AI authorship. Future research should explore additional stylistic elements—such as conversational tone, narrative framing, or collaborative authorship approaches—to better understand how these factors might mitigate biases and improve audience perceptions of AI-generated apologies.

Second, this study focused on two potential theoretical mechanisms but did not examine other mediating variables, such as perceived credibility, emotional resonance, or empathy. Investigating these variables in future research could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms driving audience evaluations of AI-generated apologies.

Conclusions

While human-authored apologies with warm tones foster greater trust and forgiveness, AI-authored messages face significant challenges due to machine heuristic, even when paired with warmth tones. These findings underscore the need for strategic communication approaches that address audience skepticism toward AI-authored content.

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Table 1
Descriptive statistics for key dependent variables by experimental condition

Condition		Forgive		Trust	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
AI (N=85)	Warmth (N=42)	4.18_{a}	1.48	4.03^{a}	1.26
	Competence (N=43)	4.58_{a}	1.44	4.36^{a}	1.24
Human (N=86)	Warmth (N=42)	5.28^{b}	0.87	5.07^{b}	0.95
	Competence (N=44)	4.88^{b}	1.16	4.70^{b}	1.00
Mixed (N=86)	Warmth (N=43)	4.98^{b}	1.46	4.77^{b}	1.12

	Competence (N=43)	5.06^b	1.14	4.50^b	1.18
Unknown (N=84)	Warmth (N=42)	5.00^b	1.18	4.78^b	1.25
	Competence (N=42)	4.73^b	1.32	4.50^b	1.04

Note. Means sharing subscripts do not differ significantly at $\alpha = .05$ as indicated by Tukey's b

Figure 1
The interaction effects of creator attribution and relation style on machine heuristic and sincerity.

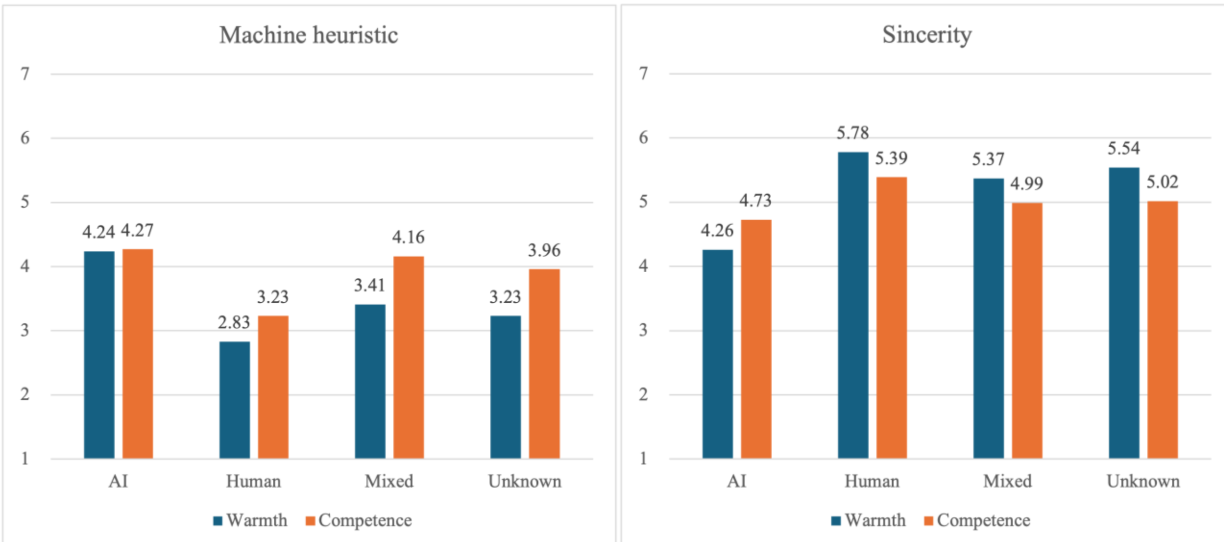


Table 2

ANCOVA results for outcomes variables as a function of authorship attribution and relational tone

Dependent variable	Machine heuristic					Sincerity				
Source	*SS*	*df*	*F*	η^2	power	*SS*	*df*	*F*	η^2	power
Corrected model	91.51	7	6.1***	0.11	1.00	70.61	7	6.23***	0.12	1.00
Creator attribution	65.63	3	10.2***	0.08	1.00	54.69	3	11.26***	0.09	1.00
Relational tone	19.1	1	8.91**	0.03	0.85	3.47	1	2.14	0.01	0.31
Creator attribution x Relational tone	7.24	3	1.13	0.01	0.30	13.08	3	2.69*	0.02	0.65
Error	714.01	333				539.06	333			
Corrected total	805.51	340				609.67	340			
Dependent variable	**Forgiveness intention**					**Trust on the organization**				
Source	*SS*	*df*	*F*	η^2	power	*SS*	*df*	*F*	η^2	power
Corrected model	33.64	7	2.98**	0.06	0.93	29.17	7	3.24**	0.06	0.95
(Intercept)	7972.06	1	4935.22***	0.94	1.00	7186.94	1	5587.78***	0.94	1.00
Creator attribution	25.59	3	5.28***	0.05	0.93	21.02	3	5.45***	0.05	0.94
Relational tone	0.19	1	0.12	0.00	0.06	1.86	1	1.45	0.00	0.22
Creator attribution x Relational tone	8.22	3	1.70	0.02	0.44	6.62	3	1.72	0.02	0.45
Error	537.91	333				428.30	333			
Corrected total	571.55	340				457.47	340			

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 3

Moderated mediation analysis results with Perceived Sincerity as Mediator and Forgiveness Intent and Trust as Outcome Variables

Model/Effect	**b**	**SE**	**Z**	**BC 95% CI**	**Model/Effect**	**b**	**SE**	**Z**	**BC 95% CI**

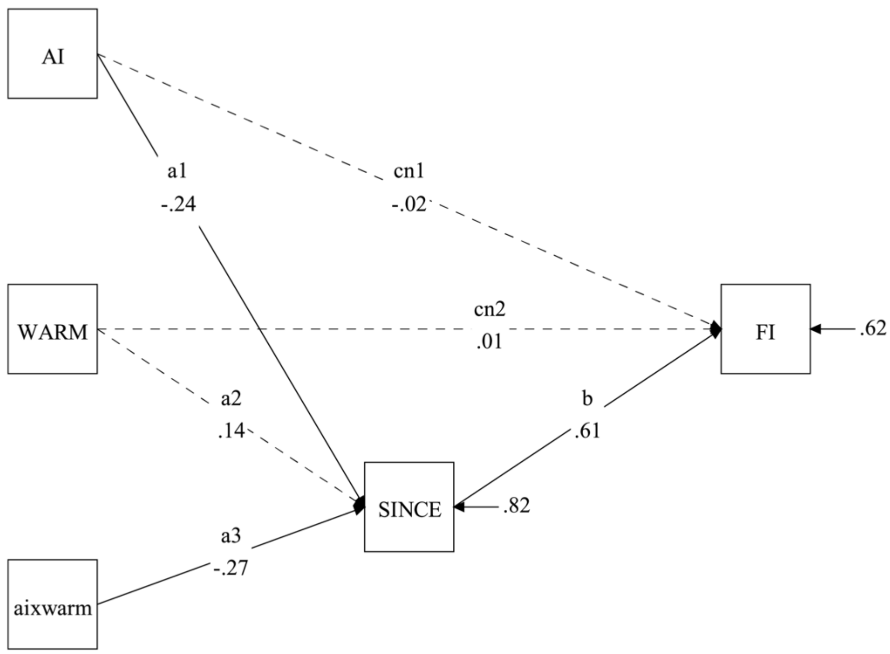
Mediator Variable Model (SINCE)					**Mediator Variable Model (SINCE)**				
AI	-.24**	.09	-2.75	[-.41, -.07]	AI	-.24**	.09	-2.75	[-.41, -.07]
WARM	.14	.07	1.93	[-.00, .29]	WARM	.14	.07	1.93	[-.003, .29]
AIxWARM	- .27*	.12	-2.33	[-.49, -.03]	AIxWARM	- .27*	.12	-2.33	[-.49, -.03]
Dependent Variable Model (FI)	**b**	**SE**	**Z**	**BC 95% CI**	**Dependent Variable Model (TRST)**	**b**	**SE**	**Z**	**BC 95% CI**
SINCE	.61***	.06	10.11	[.48, .72]	SINCE	.72***	.05	13.22	[.60, .81]
AI	-.02	.06	-.34	[-.14, .10]	AI	-.01	.06	-.11	[-.12, .10]
WARM	.01	.06	.14	[-.11, .13]	WARM	.02	.05	.38	[-.09, .12]
Conditional Indirect Effects	***b***	**SE**	**t**	**BC 95% CI**	**Conditional Indirect Effects**	***b***	**SE**	**t**	**BC 95% CI**
AI → SINCE → FI (Low WARM)	- .39**	.14	-2.70	[-.68, -.12]	AI → SINCE → TRST (Low WARM)	-.41**	.15	-2.75	[-.71, -.12]
AI → SINCE → FI (High WARM)	- .89***	.19	-4.59	[-1.30, -.53]	AI → SINCE → TRST (High WARM)	-.94***	.20	-4.70	[-1.35, -.57]
Moderated Indirect Effect	-.50*	.24	-2.13	[-.98, -.06]	**Moderated Indirect Effect**	-.53*	.25	-2.13	[-1.03, -.06]
Total Indirect Effect (AI → SINCE → FI)	-1.28***	.25	-5.18	[-1.79, -.83]	**Total Indirect Effect (AI → SINCE → TRST)**	-1.35***	.25	-5.39	[-1.87, -.89]

Note. BC 95% CI indicates bias-corrected bootstrap (10,000 resample) confidence interval. AI: Dummy-coded variable where AI = 1 (AI-generated source). The human condition serves as the reference group (not explicitly coded).WARM: Dummy-coded variable

where WARM = 1 (warmth-focused tone). The competence-focused tone serves as the reference group. SINCE: Perceived sincerity of the corporate statement (mediator). FI: Forgiveness intention following the crisis (dependent variable). TRST: Trust (DV).
Low WARM: Indirect effect of AI → SINCE → FI when WARM = 0 (competence condition). High WARM: Indirect effect of AI → SINCE → FI when WARM = 1 (warmth condition). Moderated Indirect Effect: Difference between conditional indirect effects at low and high levels of WARM. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Figure 2

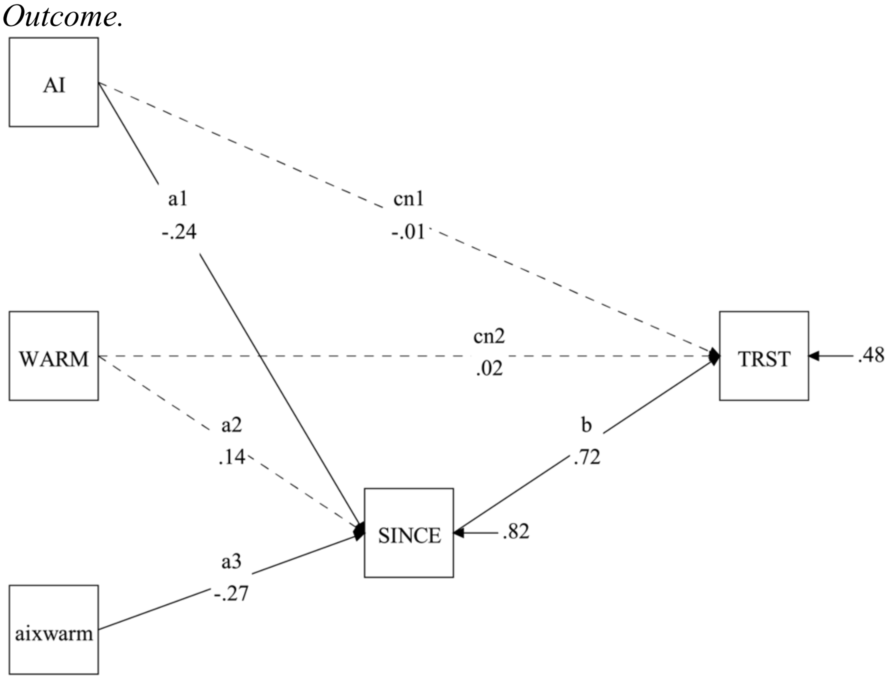
Moderated Mediation Analysis Results with Perceived Sincerity as Mediator and Forgiveness Intent as Outcome.



Note. SINCE = $a_1(AI) + a_2\,(WARM) + a_3\,(ai\ X\ warm) + e_1$ fi = b(SINCE) + cn_1 (*AI*) + cn_2 (WARM) + e_2

Figure 3

Moderated Mediation Analysis Results with Perceived Sincerity as Mediator and Trust as Outcome.



Note. SINCE = $a_1(AI) + a_2\ (WARM) + a_3\ (ai\ X\ warm) + e_1$
TRST = b(SINCE) + cn_1 (AI) + cn_2 (WARM) + e_2

Analyzing Image Restoration Strategies in Fortune 500 Companies' Responses to Stakeholder Pushback on DEI Initiatives

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Abstract

This study examines the image restoration rhetoric employed by a sample of Fortune 500 companies to address stakeholder pushback against DEI initiatives. Through content analysis of public statements, this research identifies common rhetorical strategies used to assuage DEI-related backlash, defend legitimacy, and preserve long-established relationships with key publics.

Keywords: corporate social advocacy (CSA); image restoration theory (IRT); Diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI); wokewashing; stakeholders; content analysis

Analyzing Image Restoration Strategies in Fortune 500 Companies' Responses to Stakeholder Pushback on DEI Initiatives

Since the death of George Floyd, corporate advocacy for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been regarded as an institutional norm among major global companies (Warren, 2022). Conservative activists are increasingly waging a cultural war against large U.S. companies with conservative customer bases, effectively pressuring them to abandon or scale back their DEI advocacy (Pisani & Cutter, 2024). Many major companies have since reduced their DEI-related budgets and policies in response to this mounting conservative activism online (Trkulja et al., 2024). Fortune 100 companies have significantly reduced their use of "DEI"-related terms in 2024 compared to 2023, by 22% and mentions of "diversity officer" by 49%, opting instead for less contentious terms such as "belonging" and "diverse experience" (Umoh, 2024). A growing body of research examines the potential corporate behavior when facing "market contention" (Dorobantu et al., 2017; Odziemkowska & McDonnell, 2024) such as activists' employing confrontational tactics like boycotts. However, no published research has demonstrated how large global companies address market contention while defending against legitimacy threats and preserving their long-established relationships with key publics. Grounded in Benoit's (1997, 2024) Image Repair (AKA, Restoration) Theory (IRT), this study aims to examine the image restoration rhetoric employed by a sample of Fortune 500 companies to assuage stakeholder pushback against DEI initiatives.

Literature Review

CSA at the Crossroad

The promotion of DEI initiatives as a cornerstone of corporate social advocacy (CSA) has established a new normative expectation for U.S. businesses. Firms increasingly engage in CSA, often addressing controversial social issues to project values of inclusivity and equity, a phenomenon described as a "norm cascade" (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 895). This change in norms is driven by industry leaders' inertia, the necessity to maintain legitimacy, and the reputational benefits associated with corporate activism. These changing norms are driven not only by the need for legitimacy and reputational benefits but also by internal organizational dynamics, such as the influence of managers and stakeholder expectations. Foss and Klein (2023) argue that firms' engagement in CSA reflects a combination of instrumental and normative motivations, shaped by institutional pressures and competitive market dynamics. Companies often emulate the behavior of successful peers to secure legitimacy and align with stakeholder values, while also leveraging CSA practices to meet evolving market expectations.

However, this widespread adoption of DEI advocacy has faced a profound and organized backlash. Beginning in 2023, a surge of socio-political changes began undermining corporate social impact (CSI) efforts centered on DEI. Key incidents, such as political retaliation against Disney following its opposition to Florida's Parental Rights in Education Act (Barnes, 2022) and the public boycotts against Budweiser after its collaboration with transgender activist Dylan Mulvaney (Coffee, 2023), marked turning points in this backlash. These incidents exemplify how contentious political and social environments can rapidly transform the perception and viability of DEI initiatives, especially for companies with conservative consumer bases. Research underscores the impact of this backlash on corporate behavior. Major players like Meta and Alphabet, which had previously championed DEI efforts in response to the death of George Floyd, have notably scaled back their initiatives (Barrett, 2024). Conservative activists, such as Robby Starbuck, have intensified their efforts to challenge DEI policies, resulting in a tangible shift among companies with conservative customer bases (Williams, 2024).

The shifting political landscape, particularly following the reelection of Donald Trump as U.S. President, is anticipated to intensify the challenges facing corporate DEI initiatives (Yoshino et al., 2024). Heightened political pressures, coupled with increasingly vocal consumer activism, have placed Corporate America at a pivotal crossroads. For instance, Walmart, under growing scrutiny from conservative stakeholders, announced significant reductions to its DEI programs. These included the closure of its Center for Racial Equity and the removal of select LGBTQ-themed items from its platform (Nassauer, 2024). Similarly, Toyota, once known for its Go Purple For #SpiritDay app in partnership with GLAAD, reversed course by discontinuing its DEI programs, sponsorship of LGBTQ events, and participation in the Corporate Equality Index, drawing criticism for "pinkwashing" gay rights (Conner, 2024).

Companies must now navigate a landscape where the adoption of DEI initiatives risks alienating key stakeholders, while the abandonment of such programs may lead to accusations of insincerity or corporate hypocrisy (see Wagner et al., 2009). Public relations experts have emphasized the importance of sustained commitment to DEI, on the grounds that failing to deliver on DEI promises—often labeled as "wokewashing"—can result in significant reputational harm (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Richard Edelman, CEO of Edelman, underscores this risk through findings from his Trust Barometer, which reveals that two-thirds of respondents perceive companies as underperforming in addressing racism within their organizations (Larkin, 2024). Therefore, we argue that these insights highlight the high reputational stakes for firms reevaluating their DEI strategies and underscore the critical need for thoughtful and transparent communication during such transitions.

The communication strategies companies adopt when revising or scaling down DEI policies are integral to managing public perceptions of credibility and sincerity (Klinksiek, 2024; Penning, 2024). Wagner et al. (2009) note that sudden reversals in social responsibility efforts can intensify criticisms of corporate hypocrisy and damage corporate reputations. Likewise, we argue that suddenly abandoning a previously held stance on CSA can be a strategically weak decision from a public relations perspective. Such abrupt changes risk creating the perception that the company's prior advocacy on social causes was opportunistic, undertaken more to enhance its image than out of genuine commitment. This perception can lead stakeholders to question the company's authenticity, eroding trust and diminishing the credibility of its CSA efforts (Lee, 2024; Lim & Young, 2021).

To mitigate such risks, organizations must employ carefully crafted communication strategies to inform stakeholders of policy changes, whether maintaining, scaling back, or reversing prior commitments. Transparent and justified communication is particularly crucial when scaling down or abandoning DEI programs, as these actions disproportionately risk alienating socially conscious publics and younger generations. Especially when implementing a significant change, like scaling back DEI initiatives, effective communication is essential for maintaining public trust and fostering the credibility and sincerity of organizational efforts.

Despite the importance of strategically employed communication strategies, no prior research has systematically examined how large corporations communicate changes to their environmental, social, and governance (ESG) or DEI strategies. Observing the responses of more than 30 Fortune 500 companies amid DEI-related controversies, this study aims to analyze the image restoration strategies (Benoit, 1997) employed in public relations materials such as press releases, interviews, and statements. The research further seeks to identify temporal patterns in these strategies and assess their effectiveness in addressing stakeholder pushback. This inquiry can contribute to understanding the intersection of corporate communication, stakeholder engagement, and reputation management in the context of contested DEI initiatives.

Image Repair Theory (IRT)

Image Repair Theory (IRT), also known as image restoration theory, explains strategic rhetoric that organizations and individuals in crisis or controversy can employ to protect the organization from potential perceptual damage to its credibility and reputation (Benoit, 1997, 2024). In essence, IRT offers several strategies that an organization can consider addressing the issue of controversy or offense it had inflicted on the potential victims to be affected by its action. In his seminal essay, Benoit (1997) categorizes organizational responses to reputational crises into five major categories of image repair/restoration strategies (IRS)—denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. The evasion of responsibility is further divided into provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intention, whereas reducing offensiveness is further divided into bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack the accuser, and compensation.

The IRT has offered the most useful framework for analyzing various types of repair strategies to be considered in crisis situations without taking a reductionist approach (refer to Hearit, 2018). The IRT has been applied to various manage reputational threat cases including Southwest Airlines' response to its October 2021 flight cancellation crisis (Thomsen, 2023), Boeing's Image Repair after the 737 Max Airplane Crashes (Benoit, 2024), Kamala Harris' reputational threats during her vice-presidential campaign (Waymer & Hill, 2023), several fraud and mismanagement crises involving global corporations (Caldiero et al., 2009), and so forth. Benoit himself later admitted that there are some strategies that may not be classified as the IRT's available inventories, which include "deflect attention," which was found in Donald Trump's speech (Benoit, 2024).

Aside from the IRS, Benoit (2024) proposed several steps organizations may take when preparing to defend its potential perceptual damage. One of the important steps is to select the most important audiences and determine the nature of the threat or the basis of negative or unfavorable perceptions and attitudes. In identifying these key audiences, the common manager's dilemma is how to satisfy the audiences who may have "conflicting goals, beliefs, values, and attitudes" (Benoit, 2024, p. 23). This dilemma is also applied to the situation in which a public company reverses its previously held DEI initiatives or scales down DEI-related programs due to pressure from conservative activists. Without question, this reversal or downscaling will disappoint another public who believes the company should promote the DEI values and support DEI programs. For example, when some Fortune 500 companies announced they were rolling back or ending DEI programs, it sparked pushback from stakeholders in DEI support groups. Therefore, public companies deciding to reverse previously held stances, initiatives, or programs must provide responsible explanations, what Hearit (2018) refers to as "reason-giving discourse," to restore legitimacy. This form of communication, grounded in rhetorical theory, emphasizes the importance of providing clear, transparent justifications that address public concerns and uphold institutional credibility (Hearit, 2018). When implementing IRS, organizations should avoid combining contradictory strategies that may undermine the coherence of their statements (Benoit, 2024). Benoit illustrates this point with the example, "I didn't hit her, and anyway, she provoked me into slapping her," noting that such an approach does little to improve reputation. For instance, if an organization rolls back a previously supported program, it would be problematic to deny involvement in DEI support while simultaneously bolstering its prior contributions to fostering inclusivity. Some repair strategies, however, complement each other, such as mortification and corrective action, which can work effectively together (Benoit, 2024, p. 25). This discussion raises critical research questions about the strategies companies use to provide reasoned justifications for changes in their DEI commitments. Specifically, it prompts an exploration of the repair strategies organizations employ to justify decisions to end, downscale, or maintain their previously promoted DEI initiatives. Additionally, it invites an inquiry into whether these strategies evolve over time in response to significant events and turning points.

Research Questions

RQ1. How have Fortune 500 companies' stances on DEI initiatives shifted across different phases of the evolving DEI environment?

RQ2. Do the image repair strategies companies employ vary across different phases of the evolving DEI environment?

RQ3. Do the image repair strategies employed by companies differ based on their stance toward DEI commitments (ending, modifying, or maintaining)?

Method

This study analyzed public statements from 32 large global companies, including 17 Fortune 500 companies. Companies were selected based on their publication of DEI reports in 2023 or 2024, as identified by Purpose Brand (Purpose Brand, 2023, 2025), and their availability of public statements such as press releases, interviews, or social media posts addressing DEI strategies. Of the 32 companies analyzed, 14 withdrew from DEI commitments, 13 modified their policies, and 5 maintained their previous DEI commitments. To ensure diverse responses, companies were included if they exhibited one of three stances: ending DEI programs, modifying existing policies, or maintaining prior commitments. The "Modify" category in our coding encompasses a wide range of actions that reflect realignment or recalibration of a company's previous stance or actions on DEI. These actions range from slight adjustments to significant scaling back of prior commitments and support. While most firms in this category made substantial reductions to their DEI initiatives, some implemented only minor changes. To account for this variability, we selected "modify" as a representative term rather than "downscale," which implies exclusively significant reductions.

Data Collection

Data were gathered from corporate-owned channels, including newsroom sections on company websites and official social media accounts, as well as news media sources. To ensure more comprehensive inclusion, we utilized Newsbank Inc. searches pairing company names with keywords such as "diversity," "inclusion," "equity," or "DEI." The search scope extended beyond headlines to include full-text articles, reducing the risk of missing relevant information. We also conducted additional searches using Google News to supplement and cross-validate the coverage of all relevant companies.

Contextual Phases

The collection period spanned from January 2023 to January 10, 2025, capturing corporate responses to evolving market conditions and sociopolitical dynamics during this time. To better understand the corporate responses, we identified three critical phases characterized by key sociopolitical events that significantly influenced U.S. companies' advocacy or shifts in DEI-related initiatives, policies, and actions.

Phase I (January 2023–June 2023): This phase occurred amidst the ongoing influence of social justice movements sparked by George Floyd's death, which had heightened societal demands for greater corporate diversity and accountability. Notably, The Nasdaq Stock Market's board diversity rules, enacted in August 2021 and approved by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), required Nasdaq-listed companies to disclose board diversity information starting with the 2023 proxy season (NASDAQ, 2023). This regulatory push signaled institutional support for corporate diversity efforts. However, growing conservative opposition to DEI initiatives also began to materialize, marked by events such as the online protest against Bud Light. This backlash followed transgender activist Dylan Mulvaney's sponsored Instagram promotion featuring custom cans with her image, triggering calls for a boycott (Coffee, 2023). These countervailing forces highlighted the complex environment for corporate DEI advocacy during this phase.

Phase II (July 2023–October 2024): This phase was defined by increasing polarization around DEI initiatives. A pivotal moment occurred when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down affirmative action in college admissions in June 2023 (Bravin, 2023), a decision with far-reaching implications for corporate diversity policies. The ruling intensified debates about the legitimacy of DEI programs, emboldening critics and complicating efforts to maintain diversity initiatives.

Phase III (November 2024–January 2025): The final phase was shaped by two major events. First, the election of Donald Trump as the 47th President of the United States in November 2024, which signaled a political shift with likely ramifications for corporate governance and social policies. Second, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit struck down Nasdaq's board diversity rules in December 2024, nullifying a key regulatory mechanism supporting corporate diversity initiatives (Osipovich, 2024). Together, these events further fueled the rollback of DEI commitments among major corporations.

Coding Procedure and Intercoder Reliability

For the latent variable of IRS, the unit of analysis was defined as sentences grouped semantically based on their "ideational kernel," which represents the core concept or idea within the text (Carley, 1993, p. 81). To ensure precision, semantically related sentences or paragraphs from a single corporate statement were separated and saved individually in the coding book, enabling granular analysis. Two trained coders—one undergraduate and one graduate student majoring in public relations—independently analyzed each unit of text to identify and categorize the application of IRS. During the initial coding phase, the coders performed iterative exercises using sample data. Discrepancies were addressed through moderated discussions, and the codebook was refined to improve consistency. Following training, 50 items were individually coded, resulting in 15 discrepancies, an agreement rate of 70%, and a Scott's Pi score of 0.556, indicating moderate reliability. To address these disagreements, the coders further refined guidelines for the strategies that showed the most frequent inconsistencies. After these clarifications, they analyzed an additional 50 items, achieving an observed agreement rate of 83% and improving the Scott's Pi score to 0.817. These iterative steps ensured high inter-coder reliability and a rigorous, systematic approach to the content analysis, providing a strong foundation for the study's findings. Finally, further training and validation efforts led to 100% agreement on 12 additional items, marking the successful completion of the coding process. These steps were essential for improving coder reliability and ensuring a systematic and rigorous analysis for this study. We provided the samples of IRS coding through a data repository (see Appendix_Data, 2025).

RESULTS

Overview of the Company Profiles and Stance Changes Across Three Phases

We presented an overview of the companies analyzed across different phases in **Table 1**, which includes their stances toward DEI commitments and the release platforms used to announce their stances. Release platforms indicate the mediums through which companies communicated their decisions, such as news media, X (formerly Twitter), company webpages, or direct engagement with Robby Starbuck's social media platform. In Phase 1, seven companies were analyzed. Among them, five companies adjusted their DEI stances, categorized under "Modify," and primarily utilized platforms like X and news media for their announcements. Notably, companies like Hershey's and M&M's communicated through X, whereas Meta and Alphabet relied on traditional news media. Two companies, Anheuser-Busch InBev (Budweiser) and Starbucks, chose to maintain their DEI commitments, also using X as their primary release platform.

In Phase 2, where Robby Starbuck emerged as a salient figure among conservative activist groups, several companies made notable announcements that garnered media attention. Companies like Harley-Davidson and Tractor Supply publicly announced their decision to end DEI commitments, using X or their corporate webpages as communication channels. Meanwhile, other companies, such as Zoom, Microsoft, and CNN, opted for a modify stance, with their announcements featured primarily in news media. Firms like Lowe's and Brown-Forman directly conveyed their formal stance communications through Robby Starbuck's social media platform, which shows the growing influence of conservative activists during this phase.

In Phase 3, four companies announced their decision to end DEI commitments, including Walmart, Nissan, and McDonald's, which used platforms such as X and news media. However, three prominent companies—Costco, Apple, and Delta—stood out for maintaining their DEI commitments during this contentious period. These firms used either their corporate webpages or traditional news media to emphasize their dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Results of Answers to Proposed Research Questions

To answer RQ1, we analyzed company stances on DEI advocacy over three phases. The results reveal distinct temporal trends in corporate responses to DEI-related pressures. A chi-square test was conducted to determine whether the distribution of stances (End, Modify, Maintain) significantly differed across the three phases, yielding a statistically significant result (See **Table 2**),

In Phase I (January 2023–June 2023), no companies were observed to end their DEI initiatives (0%). Instead, the majority of companies (71.4%) opted to modify their existing policies, reflecting a measured approach to navigating stakeholder pressures during this period. Meanwhile, 28.6% of companies maintained their previous DEI commitments, demonstrating some degree of resilience to external pressures.

During Phase II (July 2023–October 2024), a significant shift occurred as 52.9% of companies ended their DEI programs entirely. The percentage of companies modifying their DEI policies increased to 47.1%, while no companies were observed to maintain their DEI commitments. This phase illustrates heightened backlash against DEI initiatives and an increasing trend toward scaling back commitments.

In Phase III (November 2024–January 2025), the trend of ending DEI programs persisted, with 50.0% of companies choosing to terminate their initiatives. However, this phase also marked a resurgence of companies maintaining their DEI commitments, with Costco, Apple, and Delta Airlines publicly reaffirming their dedication to diversity, equity, and inclusion. These companies accounted for 37.5% of the stances in this phase, reflecting a countertrend in response to sustained backlash. Additionally, 12.5% of companies modified their DEI policies during this period.

RQ2 asked whether the image repair strategies employed by companies vary across different phases of the evolving DEI environment. The crosstab analysis examined whether companies' use of image restoration strategies (IRS) varied across the three phases of the evolving DEI environment. A chi-square test revealed no statistically significant association between phases and the distribution of IRS ($\chi^2 = 27.21$, df=20, $p = .130$). These results suggest that the types of strategies employed remained generally consistent across the three phases. (Table not displayed due to non-significant chi-square findings.)

Bolstering was the most frequently employed strategy, accounting for 40.5% of all IRS used. Its usage was highest in Phase I (50.0%) but declined in Phase II (37.9%) and Phase III (38.5%). Corrective action was the second most commonly employed strategy, accounting for 21.5% of all strategies. Its usage peaked in Phase II (29.3%) and dropped to 15.4% in Phase III, which reflects a potential shift in companies' approaches as external pressures intensified. Denial accounted for 10.0% of all IRS observed, with its use increased in Phase 3 (12.8%) compared to Phase I (8.3%) and Phase 2 (8.6%). This strategy allowed firms to reject accusations or misinterpretations directly, suggesting a growing defensive posture in later phases.

Shift the blame was rarely used in Phase I (4.2%) and Phase II (3.4%) but increased to 10.3% in Phase III. This strategy enabled companies to attribute challenges or decisions to external factors, such as regulatory changes or market dynamics. Good Intention, though infrequent overall, was most notably observed in Phase I (12.5%), reflecting early efforts by companies to present their actions as sincere responses to stakeholder expectations. Other strategies, such as transcendence (6.6% overall) and defeasibility (4.1% overall), were used sparingly and showed no notable variation across phases. Minimization and other less common strategies also remained relatively constant throughout the study period.

To answer RQ3, we analyzed the IRS employed by companies based on their stance toward DEI commitments under external pressures (See **Table 3**). A chi-square test was conducted to determine whether the use of IRS varied significantly depending on whether companies chose to end, modify, or maintain their DEI initiatives. The analysis revealed a statistically significant association between stance and the type of repair strategy employed ($\chi^2 = 39.86$, df= 20, $p = .005$). The most notable difference was observed in the use of Corrective Action. This strategy was predominantly employed by companies ending their DEI initiatives (29.7%), while companies modifying (17.6%) or maintaining (4.3%) their policies used it less frequently. Defeasibility—citing external factors or lack of control—was exclusively used by companies ending (6.3%) or modifying (2.9%) their DEI initiatives and was absent among companies maintaining their commitments. Interestingly, simple denial displayed varying patterns of usage. Companies maintaining their DEI stance employed this strategy more frequently (21.7%) than those modifying (14.7%) or ending (3.1%) their initiatives.

Discussion

This study examined the evolving communication strategies of Fortune 500 companies in response to external pressures, addressing a critical gap in understanding how companies adapt their DEI stances amidst shifting sociopolitical environments. By analyzing companies' IRS across three distinct phases, the study provides insights into how external factors such as U.S. Supreme Court and Appeals Court rulings, along with stakeholder demands, influence corporate responses to changing sociopolitical dynamics.

One of the most notable findings of this study is the shift in corporate responses to external sociopolitical changes, court decisions, and diverse stakeholder pressures. The chi-square analysis confirms that the distribution of stances—ending, modifying, or maintaining DEI initiatives—significantly shifted across the three phases, reflecting the profound impact of key events on corporate strategies. Among these events, the U.S. Supreme Court's reversal of affirmative action in college admissions (Bravin, 2023) and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit's decision to strike down Nasdaq's board diversity rule (Osipovich, 2024) stand out as pivotal moments. These rulings signaled institutional pushback against diversity-focused initiatives, reinforcing a broader hostile environment toward DEI advocacy. Conservative activists further amplified this resistance through organized pressures, as seen in the boycott of Bud Light following its partnership with Dylan Mulvaney (Coffee, 2023).

Our findings reveal that many companies chose to scale back or terminate their DEI commitments during Phases II and III, aligning with the growing conservative backlash and unfavorable sociopolitical climate. However, the reemergence of companies maintaining their DEI stance in Phase III, including high-profile firms like Apple and Costco (Nassauer, 2025), highlights the complexity of corporate decision-making regarding DEI commitments. These companies not only resisted external pressures but also reaffirmed their commitment to DEI, citing its critical importance to their business strategies and values.

Results for RQ2 reveal that while slight variations were observed in a few strategies, the chi-square analysis indicates no statistically significant association between companies' use of IRS and the different phases, with no notable shifts in strategy distribution over time. Notably, strategies such as bolstering and corrective action together accounted for the majority of IRS observed. Bolstering, which emphasizes past achievements and values, allowed companies to reinforce their credibility and reassure stakeholders, making it a universally applied approach across all phases. The variation in the use of corrective action, which peaked in Phase II before declining in Phase III, may reflect that companies like Tractor Supply, Harley-Davidson, and Lowe's were more actively attempting to appease widely salient and vocal activist Robby Starbuck (Pisani & Cutter, 2024). These companies expressed remorse and pledged to their conservative base that they were no longer advocating for positions perceived as misaligned with their core customers. The subsequent decline in corrective action usage could indicate a strategic pivot, as firms either scaled back engagement or faced intensifying challenges that made corrective measures less feasible. The increase in denial and shift the blame in Phase III suggests a more defensive posture among companies as sociopolitical pressures and stakeholder scrutiny escalated.

The rise in denial indicates a tendency to reject accusations directly, while the uptick in shift the blame reflects efforts to deflect responsibility onto external factors. These patterns highlight a growing need for companies to manage reputational risks under heightened opposition. The prominence of good intention in Phase I aligns with early efforts to frame DEI actions as sincere and socially responsible. However, this trend diminished in later phases as companies navigated more contentious environments. Similarly, the low and stable usage of strategies like transcendence and defeasibility suggests a cautious approach to less conventional or potentially polarizing tactics. Taken together, the findings for RQ2 demonstrate a persistent reliance on core strategies like bolstering and corrective action, while revealing subtle shifts toward more defensive tactics, such as denial and shift the blame, in response to evolving stakeholder expectations and various external pressures.

The results for RQ3 demonstrate that companies' use of image restoration strategies (IRS) is significantly affected by their stance on DEI commitments. Companies ending their DEI programs were more likely to employ corrective action and blame shifting, which indicates realignment with external pressures or attributing challenges to external factors. These strategies suggest an effort to justify their decisions as necessary responses to external circumstances, thereby mitigating reputational damage. In addition, the higher prevalence of corrective action among companies ending their DEI efforts further shows the influence of external pressures on corporate decision-making. By framing their actions as constructive measures or necessary realignments, these companies sought to maintain credibility and mitigate backlash while stepping back from previous commitments. The use of defeasibility—justifying actions as influenced by external constraints—was notably more common among companies walking back their DEI programs. This pattern reflects an attempt to shift responsibility away from the organization and onto external factors, reducing the perception of intentionality in scaling back initiatives.

In contrast, companies maintaining their DEI commitments leaned heavily on bolstering, denial, and attacking the accuser to defend their ongoing values and actively counter criticisms. These strategies reflect a more proactive and resolute communication approach, signaling unwavering commitment to diversity principles while countering opposing narratives. The widespread use of bolstering across all stances suggests that emphasizing past achievements and core values is a universally appealing strategy, regardless of whether companies chose to end, modify, or maintain their DEI initiatives. This finding indicates that companies consistently recognize the reputational benefits of highlighting their historical contributions to inclusivity, even in the face of changing commitments.

Finally, the prominent use of Denial among companies maintaining their DEI initiatives highlights a strategy aimed at directly rejecting criticisms or accusations. This approach likely serves to reassure stakeholders of their steadfast values and reinforce trust, particularly in the face of mounting scrutiny or challenges from detractors. These findings underscore the nuanced ways in which companies adapt their communication strategies to align with their chosen DEI stances, balancing stakeholder expectations with external sociopolitical pressures. The interplay between stance and strategy reveals how organizations navigate complex reputational landscapes, offering insights into the strategic considerations underlying corporate messaging.

We conducted a post-hoc qualitative analysis to gain additional insights into the range of IRS employed by companies. Sample statements for each IRS are provided through a data repository (see Appendix_Data, 2025). Bolstering, the most frequently employed strategy, served as a groundwork for firms to pivot their stance by reinforcing their long-standing commitments to social responsibility. For example, firms emphasized historical contributions to diversity to assure stakeholders of their authenticity and credibility.

Nevertheless, companies that ended or significantly downscaled their DEI initiatives often used corrective action to appease more conservative stakeholders, asserting that they would no longer commit to DEI to better align with stakeholder expectations. This was particularly evident in statements from companies like Harley-Davidson and Tractor Supply, which outlined strategic shifts, including ending certain DEI programs, to realign with core customer values and mitigate backlash from conservative activist groups.

Denial and shift the blame were less common but notable strategies, especially in later phases. Both ending and maintaining companies used denial explicitly to reject accusations of insincerity or divisiveness in their DEI initiatives, often framing their actions as misinterpreted or unfairly criticized. For instance, firms such as Meta in Phase III used denial to reaffirm their stance while dispelling perceptions of preferential treatment. Shift the blame was employed to deflect responsibility onto external factors, such as legal constraints or market dynamics, thereby reducing the perception of direct culpability.

Other strategies, such as good intention and transcendence, were used more selectively. In good intention, companies framed their efforts as sincere responses to stakeholder needs, often invoking themes of unity and community building. Transcendence reframed DEI actions within broader societal goals, such as economic progress or innovation, to elevate the narrative beyond immediate controversies. Overall, companies used IRS to adapt their communication approaches to balance stakeholder expectations, manage reputational risks, and navigate evolving sociopolitical landscapes effectively.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study provides the first empirical insights into the use of IRS by firms responding to an evolving business environment where various stakeholders pressure companies to either double down on or exit their existing DEI policies and support. While the findings are valuable, the study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the analysis of the third phase, which began with the election of Donald Trump as U.S. President, captures only the initial stages of this period. This study does not include data from the time after Trump's inauguration, a point likely to introduce additional sociopolitical pressures on companies to take new stances or realign their DEI commitments. Future research should examine developments in this phase as more data becomes available.

Second, the content analysis relied solely on human coding. Although this approach is the most established method, it is subject to potential bias and inconsistency. Future studies could incorporate computerized textual analysis software to cross-validate findings and enhance reliability. Tools such as natural language processing (NLP) could also identify latent themes and patterns in corporate communication that may not be immediately apparent through manual coding.

Third, this study did not compare the use of IRS across different industries, such as service-oriented versus manufacturing sectors. Industry-specific dynamics could influence how companies frame their responses to stakeholder pressures and adapt their communication strategies. Future research could explore these differences to provide a more comprehensive understanding of sectoral variations in IRS usage.

Managerial implications and Conclusions

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for managers seeking strategies to protect reputational capital amid DEI-related controversies and stakeholder pressures. Companies deciding whether to maintain, modify, or end DEI commitments can benefit from strategically crafted communication approaches that balance stakeholder expectations and minimize reputational risks. Rather than abruptly abandoning DEI initiatives, companies should prioritize fostering public understanding of their decisions. Providing a clear and transparent rationale for any changes—whether maintaining, modifying, or ending commitments—helps stakeholders better understand the motivations behind the shift. Transparency mitigates perceptions of "woke washing" (Warren, 2022) or "corporate hypocrisy" (Wagner et al., 2009) while positioning the company as accountable and responsive to external pressures. When shifting stances or doubling down on prior commitments, meaningful engagement with stakeholders, including customers, employees, and advocacy groups, is critical. Companies should initiate dialogue to address concerns, explain their decisions, and identify shared values.

Interestingly, nearly all corporate statements, both official and unofficial, incorporated different communication strategies within meaningful contextual units of analysis. In rare cases, strategies such as cynicism or black humor were employed, as seen with M&M. Notably, most companies laid groundwork by bolstering their previous commitments, whether they modified or ended their advocacy and programs, demonstrating a desire to ensure that previous investments were not perceived as wasted. When companies chose to end their existing programs, they frequently used corrective action to frame the changes as necessary realignments, emphasizing accountability to their newly aligned stakeholder interests.

Another implication is that many firms did not fully leverage the potential of transcendence, which could help reframe their actions within broader societal or business goals. This approach might mitigate stakeholder discontent while preserving corporate reputation and aligning actions with long-term objectives.

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Table 1

Corporate DEI Stances and Communication Platforms by Phases

	Company Name	Stance	Release platforms

Phase			
1	Meta	Modify	News media
1	Alphabet	Modify	News media
1	M&M's	Modify	X (Twitter)
1	Hershey's	Modify	X
1	Target	Modify	X
1	Anheuser-Busch InBev (Budweiser)	Maintain	X
1	Starbucks	Maintain	X
2	Tractor Supply	End	X, Company’s webpage
2	Zoom	Modify	News media
2	Bank of America	Modify	News media
2	Microsoft	Modify	News media
2	CNN	Modify	News media
2	John Deere	Modify	X
2	Harley Davidson	End	X
2	Polaris	Modify	News media
2	Brown-Forman	End	Robby Starbuck’s social media
2	Lowe's	End	Robby Starbuck’s social media
2	Ford	End	Robby Starbuck’s social media
2	Molson Coors	End	News media
2	JP Morgan Chase	Modify	News media
2	Stanley	End	Robby Starbuck’s social media
2	Caterpillar	End	News media
2	Toyota	End	News media
2	Boeing	Modify	News media
3	Walmart	End	News media
3	Nissan	End	Robby Starbuck’s social media
3	Costco	Maintain	Company’s webpage
3	McDonald's	End	X
3	Meta	End	News media
3	Amazon	Modify	News media
3	Apple	Maintain	News media
3	Delta	Maintain	News media

Note. The “Modify” category encompasses a wide range of actions, from slight adjustments to significant scaling back of previous commitments and support. While the majority of firms in this category significantly reduced their previous DEI stance, some made only minor changes. As a result, we chose “Modify” as a representative term, rather than “Downscale,” to reflect the variation.

Table 2

Stance by phase

Phase	End	Modify	Maintain
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
I. 23/01-23/06	0 (0)	5 (71.4.)	2 (28.6)
II. 23/07-24/10	9 (52.9)	8 (47.1.7)	0 (0.0)
III. 24/11-25/1	4 (50.0)	1 (12.5.0)	3 (37.5)

Note. The frequencies and percentages represent the number of companies that has responded to the changing environments by three important political events. $|^2 = 12.56$, df = 4, p <. 05

Table 3

Image Repair Strategies by Stance

Stance	**Bolstering**	**Corrective Action**	**Transcen dence**	**Defeasi bility**	**Simple Denial**	**Shift the Blame**	**Attacking the Accuser**	**Good Intentio n**
End	26 (40.6%)	19 (29.7%)	5 (7.8%)	4 (6.3%)	2 (3.1%)	4 (6.3%)	1 (1.6%)	2 (3.1%)
Modify	14 (41.2%)	6 (17.6%)	2 (5.9%)	1 (2.9%)	5 (14.7%)	1 (2.9%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.9%)
Mainta in	9 (39.1%)	1 (4.3%)	1 (4.3%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (21.7%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (21.7%)	1 (4.3%)
Total	49 (40.5%)	26 (21.5%)	8 (6.6%)	5 (4.1%)	12 (9.9%)	5 (4.1%)	6 (5.0%)	5 (4.1%)

Note. Minimization (Modify: 2 (5.9%), Maintain: 1 (4.3%)) and Differentiation (Modify: 1 (2.9%)) were excluded from the table due to low frequencies in their respective cells. Mortification was also observed only in the **End** (1 case) and **Maintain** (1 case) stances, also excluded for the same reason. χ^2 =39.86, df= 20, p=.005.

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Abstract

Organizations increasingly recognize the importance of employee engagement and well-being for their success. This capstone study investigated the interrelationships among compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and employee engagement, focusing on employees' perceptions of leadership practices and their respective work experiences. Using a Mixed Methods Design, the research included quantitative data from an online survey (N=265) and qualitative insights from a subset of survey respondents (n = 10) who participated in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Quantitative analyses revealed strong positive relationships between compassionate leadership and both symmetrical internal communication ($r = .853$, $p < .001$, two-tailed, N = 265) and psychological safety ($r = .724$, $p < .01$, two-tailed, N = 265). Mediation analyses confirmed the role of symmetrical internal communication as a partial mediator between compassionate leadership and psychological safety, with a significant indirect effect ($\beta = .2855$, 95% CI: [.1766, .3910], N = 265). Similarly, psychological safety emerged as a partial mediator between compassionate leadership and employee engagement, with a significant indirect effect ($\beta =.2001$, 95% CI: [.1126, .2908]). The qualitative interview insights highlighted the importance of compassionate leadership behaviours, such as empathy and authenticity, in fostering symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety and employee engagement in workplace environments. Conversely, an absence of compassionate leadership behaviours was correlated with an absence of symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and employee engagement. These results demonstrate that compassionate leadership is positively associated with symmetrical internal communication and psychological safety, key factors linked to higher levels of employee engagement.

Keywords: compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, employee engagement, leadership, management, teamwork, employee wellbeing, quiet quitting

Exploring The Relationship between Compassionate Leadership, Symmetrical Internal Communication, Psychological Safety, and Employee Engagement

The success of organizations today relies heavily on the engagement and well-being of employees. In Gallup's annual State of the Global Workplace: 2023 Report, low employee engagement is estimated to cost the global economy $8.8 trillion – 9% of global GDP. Further, Gallup's data shows that 59% of employees are quiet quitting (putting in a minimum amount of effort and disconnected from the workplace) (Gallup Workplace, 2023). This data indicates that organizations worldwide have a significant opportunity to improve their bottom line by enhancing their employees' engagement, a widely known key driver of performance (Gallup, 2020; Gallup Workplace, 2023).

Amidst this challenge and opportunity, there is a growing interest in compassionate leadership, psychological safety, and symmetrical internal communication, all with linkages, in varying degrees, to enhancing employee engagement (Kang & Sung, 2017; Edmondson, 2019; Guinot et al., 2020; Shuck et al., 2019; Hougaard & Carter, 2022; Lee & Kim, 2022; McCown et al., 2023; Ramachandran, 2023). While several studies have examined these areas of research interest and their linkages to employee engagement, there seems to be a lack of research exploring their interrelationships. This study addresses this gap in the existing literature by investigating the relationships between compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and employee engagement in workplace environments. This study aims to enhance and add to the existing knowledge and current understanding of these constructs and the relationships between them and to develop new insights and recommendations for organizations on how to create workplace environments that foster psychological safety and employee engagement.

Literature Review

Compassionate Leadership

A growing body of research highlights the pivotal role of compassion and compassionate leadership in building high-performing organizations, challenging the misconception of associating compassion with weakness or a 'soft' approach (Worline & Dutton, 2017b) that tries "to please by giving [employees] what they want; rather than giving people what they need, such as tough feedback" (Ramachandran, 2023, p. 63). Contrary to views that compassionate leadership is about acquiescing to employees' wants, Hougaard & Carter (2022) argue that it fundamentally embodies "an intention to be of benefit to others" (p. 2). This intention manifests through recognizing another's suffering, empathizing with their pain, and taking action to mitigate it, thereby fostering a workplace environment characterized by warmth, care, and concern (Depow et al., 2023; Lilius et al., 2008).

The concept of empathy is often used interchangeably with compassion in leadership discourse and popular media (Depow et al., 2023). Empathy is a component of compassionate leadership, involving the ability to sense and emotionally resonate with others' distress, whereas compassion extends further, embodying a motivational construct that drives actionable efforts to alleviate suffering (Salovey & Mayer, 1990; Shuck et al., 2019; Gilbert, 2020). This distinction highlights compassionate leadership's proactive nature, addressing both obvious and more subtle forms of employee suffering, ranging from the crisis-induced stress of managing through a pandemic to daily challenges such as constrained resources and personnel management that may include having hard conversations with struggling employees (Shuck et al., 2019).

Empirical research on the relationship between compassion and leader performance in workplace environments is limited given the early stage of academic interest in exploring and building a common understanding and framework for measuring compassionate leadership (Lilius et al., 2011; Shuck et al., 2019). As compassionate leadership gains traction in both industry and academia, its overlap, and intersections with other more established humanistic, relational leadership styles, such as authentic, inclusive, transformational, and servant leadership should be acknowledged (Ramachandran et al., 2023; Shuck et al., 2019). For example, De Zulueta (2020) highlights how compassionate leadership is closely related to authentic leadership, both characterized by integrity, trust, respect, and credibility. Inclusive leadership, introduced by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) describes leaders who create a safe and supportive environment where employees can speak up and share their thoughts and opinions (Shafaei et al., 2024). Transformational leadership also overlaps in thematic areas, in particular with its focus on fostering organizational growth through one of its several traits, that of individualized consideration and attention (Bass, 1999), an approach that aligns with compassionate leadership's focus on positive organizational change and development through its commitment to understanding individual employees needs and motivations and honouring the intrinsic worth and value of every employee (Shuck et al., 2019). Lastly, servant leadership, prioritizes the needs and wellbeing of its employees first, with the understanding that by taking care of its employees as a priority, the organization's goals will be achieved (De Zulueta, 2020).

In Ramachandran et al.'s (2023) integrative, systemic review of the existing literature on compassionate leadership, the Compassionate Leader Behaviour Index (CLBI) by Shuck et al., (2019) was identified as the only compassionate leader behaviour framework and measurement tool developed to date and to the best of the researcher's knowledge, this remains true. The conceptual framework was developed specifically to measure compassionate leader behavior, comprising six key themes: Integrity, Accountability, Presence, Empathy, Authenticity, and Dignity (Shuck et al., 2019)

Symmetrical Internal Communication

Even though many leadership activities are based on communication (Holladay and Coombs, 1993) and the connection between leadership and communication is well established, "few empirical studies have examined the exact influence of organizational leadership as a contextual factor on internal communications in organizations" (Men, 2014, p. 257).

As noted by Berger (2008), symmetrical internal communication is a critical activity in organizations because it helps managers, employees and teams coordinate activities to achieve organizational and team goals, and is vital for "socialization, decision-making, problem-solving" (p. 2). Symmetrical internal communication is defined by Berger (2008) as a central process by which employees at all levels "share information, create relationships, make meaning, and construct organizational culture and values" (Men, 2014, p. 256). This includes horizontal communication, listening, understanding, collaboration, reciprocity, openness, responsiveness, feedback, negotiation, and tolerance for disagreement (Grunig, 1992; Lee, 2022). As per Grunig & Grunig (2011), symmetrical internal communication empowers and engages employees in decision-making processes and engages managers and their subordinates in dialogue in which they openly listen to and exchange feedback, facilitating organizational effectiveness and employee satisfaction. Numerous empirical studies back this up, demonstrating a positive correlation between symmetrical internal communication and a range of organizational outcomes, including trust, empowerment, organizational identification, and the relationship between employees and the organization. (Lee & Kim, 2022). Through symmetrical internal communication practices, employees are encouraged to engage in two-way dialogues and are provided opportunities to participate in decision-making processes – a practice through which management listens and "responds to the concerns and interests of employees" (Lee, 2011, p. 1633).

Psychological Safety

Global authority in the fields of psychological safety, innovation, and senior leadership development, Dr. Timothy R. Clark highlights that "a leader's most important job – above that of creating a vision and setting strategy – is to act in the role of social architect and nourish a context in which people are given the respect and permission to (a) feel included, (b) learn, (c) contribute, and (d) innovate" (Clark, 2020, p. 16). Benevene et al., (2022) asserts that the underpinning of such a work environment, characterized by felt belonging and psychological safety, is compassion. Recent research by Hougaard & Carter (2022) supports this notion, recognizing the "integral role that compassionate leadership plays "in building a psychologically safe culture" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, p. 164). Dr. Amy Edmondson, esteemed organizational behaviour scholar, professor, and author, popularly known for her research and expertise on psychological safety, notes that "without wise compassion, the culture suffers because no one feels safe to speak up. No one will share their thoughts" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, p. 163-164). The impact of this on a leader is being "cut off from getting the information [needed to] skillfully navigate your business and your team" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, p. 163-164).

The descriptive term and concept of psychological safety was first coined by scholar William Kahn in 1990 and later further defined by Clark (2020) and others as a condition in which one feels "(a) included, (b) safe to learn, (c) safe to contribute, and (d) safe to challenge the status quo – all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized or punished in some way" (p. 2). Put more simply and at the team/group level, it can be understood as "a shared belief amongst individuals as to whether it is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking in the workplace" (Newman, et al., 2017, p. 522).

Compelling support for psychological safety as a driver of team performance and innovation was Google's Project Aristotle, an initiative launched in 2012 to explore the dynamics of team effectiveness (Edmondson, 2019). Google's researchers analyzed data from 180 of their teams over a period of several years to figure out what factors contribute to the most successful teams (Edmondson, 2019). Contrary to initial expectations that the best teams would be aggregates of top performers, the findings revealed that the key to effective teams was more about how team members interacted (Duhigg, 2016). Psychological safety, the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, was found to be the most critical dynamic (Edmondson, 2019). The research showed that a psychologically safe environment allowed team members to feel safe taking risks and being vulnerable in front of each other which opened the door to higher levels of innovation, creativity, and collaboration (Duhigg, 2016). Given this, it's no surprise that Amy Edmondson (2019) highlights, "making the [work] environment safe for open communication about challenges, concerns, and opportunities is one of the most important leadership responsibilities in the twenty-first century" (p. 22).

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a positive organizational behaviour concept defined in Bakker et al., (2008) as "a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption" (p. 187). Vigor is used to describe "the high levels of energy and willingness to invest in one's work" (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016, p. 214). Dedication refers to the state of "being deeply involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge" (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016, p. 214). And lastly, absorption is a state of total concentration on one's work, such that time is experienced as passing by quickly, and it feels difficult to break away from work (Bakker et al., 2008). Kahn (1990) identified three key psychological factors that influence individuals' level of engagement with their work. The first, psychological meaningfulness, is about the individual feeling valued and worthy because of their contributions. The second, psychological safety, is all about trust, security and knowing what to expect in a situation. The third, psychological availability, refers to the capability of an individual to follow through on their work physically and emotionally.

Eldor & Harpaz's (2016) research suggests that engaged employees want to share their knowledge with their colleagues, are more open to change, are more likely to take the initiative, and are "more involved in creative thinking and problem-solving" (p. 229). Eldor & Harpaz (2016) also found that employee engagement increases the scope of activities that "employees consider as part of their roles" (p. 229). Similarly, other scholars such as May, Gilson & Harter (2004) have theorized that engaged employees are more willing to express discretionary effort in completing their work. This "positive relationship between employee engagement and extra-role performance" demonstrates one of several reasons why employee engagement is beneficial to employers (Eldor & Harpaz, 2016, p. 230).

Exploring these dimensions within the framework of Social Exchange Theory (SET), Alan Saks (2006) provided valuable insights into how reciprocal and fair exchanges between employees and employers could amplify engagement. SET suggests that engagement flourishes in environments where employees feel valued and see their contributions as meaningful (Saks, 2006). This theory highlights why an employee's perception of fairness and recognition is crucial for their engagement and how the lack of this can lead to disengagement and possibly turnover intentions. The importance of the employee-manager relationship in this context is critical and supported by Gallup's meta-analysis of 100 million employee interviews showing that 70% of the variance between the highest engaged teams and the disengaged is the relationship with the manager (Gallup, 2015).

Given evolving workplace demographics, Gallup highlights that Millennials and Generation Z prioritize purpose and development over compensation, indicating a shift from traditional relationship exchange engagement drivers to a need for meaningful work, continuous growth, and feedback (Clifton & Harter, 2019). These generations' preference for coaching over command-and-control managerial styles and their desire for ongoing conversations instead of annual reviews suggest that organizations and managers may need to adapt their engagement strategies to better meet the needs and expectations of these generations.

Hypothesis Development

Compassionate Leadership and Symmetrical Internal Communication

As asserted by Holladay & Coombs (1993), "leadership is performed largely through communication" (Men, 2014, p. 262). Men (2014) connects symmetrical internal communication to leadership, arguing that it is an outcome of authentic leadership – a leadership style that intersects with and overlaps with compassionate leadership values and behaviours such as integrity, transparency, and openness (Shuck et al., 2019). Further, compassionate leadership aligns with, and is conducive to, the key attributes of symmetrical internal communication such as listening, openness, feedback, participation, two-way dialogue, and accountability (Men, 2014).

In the book 'Compassionate Leadership: How to Do Hard Things in a Human Way', Hougaard & Carter (2022) assert that "communication is a two-way street. [Leaders] need to create mechanisms to ensure what [is] shared is clearly understood. This requires that we don't make assumptions and, instead, ask questions" (p. 167). Further, when as leaders, time is taken to ensure others understand what has been shared, care for others is demonstrated (Hougaard & Carter, 2022). Further, it's important to give a voice to "employees willing to share dissenting views" as they are often "integral to business success due to [the] diversity of thought that drives innovation and because they tend to retain the most talented, productive, and loyal employees" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, pp. 169-170). Encouraging dissent, engaging in two-way conversation, and celebrating when people are brave in speaking up creates a culture of greater transparency (Hougaard & Carter, 2022) consistent with and conducive to, symmetrical internal communication.

Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed for investigation:

H1: Compassionate leadership will have a positive relationship with symmetrical internal communication.

Compassionate Leadership and Psychological Safety

The current research on compassionate leadership suggests that it is conducive to creating the conditions for psychological safety in the workplace. As per Worline and Dutton (2017a), "Compassion helps people to greet errors and failures with the open-mindedness and openheartedness that fosters learning" (p. 20) and a "climate of psychological safety that enables the discussion of ideas, acting on creative ideas, learning from errors, or talking more openly and frequently" (Guinot et al., 2020, p. 721). This in-turn leads to people learning more and becoming more innovative. (Worline & Dutton, 2017a). Further, as Shuck's (2019) dimensions of compassionate leadership indicate, qualities such as transparent communications, asking clarifying questions, listening attentively, sharing feedback, and having difficult conversations are all conducive and supportive of a leadership and workplace environment that values psychological safety. Both compassionate leadership and cultivating psychological safety take care, courage, and candour (Edmondson, 2019; Hougaard & Carter, 2022). It's through candour that people are gifted the "feedback and input they need to develop and grow and become better" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, p. 145), enhancing transparency, clarity and providing "the basis for greater trust and psychological safety" (Hougaard & Carter, 2022, p. 155).

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Compassionate leadership will have a positive relationship with psychological safety.

Compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, and psychological safety

Given that the research to date suggests a positive relationship between compassionate leadership and symmetrical communication and a positive relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety, the researcher hypothesizes that compassionate leaders are more likely to engage in open and transparent symmetrical internal communication practices, which in turn, will contribute to higher levels of psychological safety.

Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H3: Symmetrical internal communication mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety.

Compassionate Leadership and Employee Engagement

Research on compassionate leadership suggests that it may improve employee engagement and in turn, employee performance (Eldor, 2017; Guinot et al., 2020; Krishna, 2022; Siyal, 2023). This is supported by Choi & Ko's (2024) study sampling 312 employees across several large companies in South Korea, which found that employees' experience of compassion in the workplace had a positive relationship with their job performance. Further, the existing research also indicates that when leaders lead and interact with their employees through compassionate leadership behaviours such as empathy, integrity, presence, dignity, and authenticity, employees have a higher level of engagement, improving organizational outcomes (Harter et al., 2003; Shuck et al., 2019).

Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Compassionate leadership positively influences employee engagement.

Compassionate Leadership, Psychological Safety, and Employee Engagement

There is a growing body of research at both the individual and team levels examining the effects of supportive leadership behaviours on work outcomes through psychological safety (Edmondson et al., 2019; Siyal, 2023). Empirical work has established that leader inclusiveness, trustworthiness, openness, and behavioural integrity all influence employee perceptions of psychological safety, which, in turn, may drive employee outcomes such as employee engagement (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Siyal, 2023). As Shuck's (2019) dimensions of compassionate leadership indicate, behaviours such as transparent communication, showing empathy, asking clarifying questions, listening attentively, sharing feedback, and having difficult conversations are all conducive and supportive of a leadership and workplace environment that values psychological safety, helping to encourage open and authentic interpersonal behaviours, and increase employee engagement (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023). In support of this is Siyal's (2023) recent research which investigated and confirmed an indirect effect of inclusive leadership[1] on employee engagement through the mediating mechanism of psychological safety.

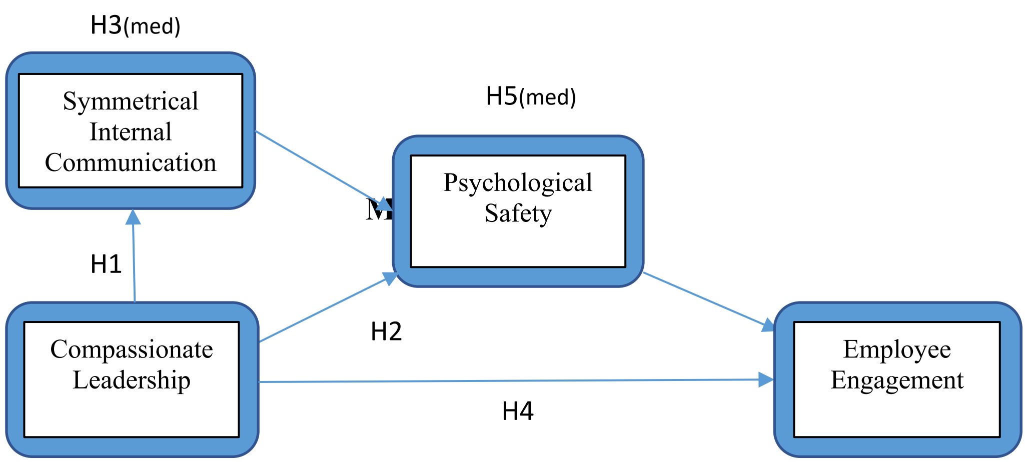
Given that the current literature suggests a relationship between compassionate leadership behaviours, psychological safety, and employee engagement, there is some evidence to suggest that compassionate leadership may contribute to psychological safety, which, in turn, may foster higher levels of employee engagement through a mediation effect. Therefore, the following hypothesis proposes that:

H5: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement.

The postulated hypotheses are in the research model, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Research Model



[1] A leadership style similar in nature to the attributes of compassionate leadership

Research Design

This study used a Mixed Methods design to explore the relationships among compassionate leadership, psychological safety, symmetrical internal communication, and employee engagement in workplace environments. This approach included quantitative data collected through an anonymous, online survey and qualitative insights collected from interviews with a subset of survey participants. The online survey included validated scales to assess individual employees' perceptions of compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and employee engagement in the workplace, while the semi-structured virtual interviews included questions designed to delve deeper into the potential interrelations among the survey constructs. This methodology allowed for cross-validation through data-triangulation, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Sciberras & Dingli, 2023). This study was reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) and received ethics clearance under project [#6687].

Participants and Recruitment

Survey

Volunteer study participants were recruited online using non-probability snowball and convenience sampling. Prospective participants were invited to complete an anonymous online survey shared via email and through public posts on various social media channels.[2] Consenting participants were asked four screening questions to ensure that they met the inclusion criteria: aged 19+, employed in Canada or the United States, and in a role that involved at least some teamwork. Please see Appendix B for examples of the recruitment posts used to share the survey on social media.

Interviews

Ten interview participants were recruited from a subset of the survey respondents who expressed interest in participating in an interview. Due to time and resource constraints, convenience sampling was used to select a range of interview participants who volunteered at the beginning, middle, and closer to the end of the survey data collection period. Interviews were scheduled with the informed consent of the participants. After the interview, participants were notified that they could request to withdraw from the study anytime and for any reason before December 20, 2023.

Data Collection

Quantitative

The survey collected data from October to November 2023. It included six demographic questions, and thirty-two 7-point Likert scale questions measuring respondents' perceptions of compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and employee engagement in the workplace.[3] The final question captured respondents' interest in participating in a follow-up interview.[4]

Of 1,640 people who opened the survey, 303 consented to participate, with 38 of those not completing the survey [excluded from the analyses]. The final sample was 265 consenting

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[2] (LinkedIn, Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook)

[3] The survey was developed using the open-source LimeSurvey 'Central Instance', a survey tool that encrypts the response data collected and securely stores it on servers at McMaster University.

[4] To preserve the anonymity of the survey responses, participants who expressed interest in a follow-up interview were invited to share their contact information (name and email) in a second survey instrument that could not be connected back to respondent data in the primary survey.

respondents ($N = 265$) who met the inclusion criteria and completed the survey. Of the 265 consenting respondents, 49.81% expressed interest in a follow-up interview, and of those, 10 were selected to participate in a follow-up interview.

Qualitative

For four weeks in November through to mid-December 2023, survey respondents were selected for one-hour semi-structured interviews. The interviews were hosted using the Zoom platform and, with the consent of the participant, recorded for the purpose of transcription. All data collected during the recorded transcription of the interviews was anonymized using de-identified descriptors such as R1, R2, R3, etc., including direct quotations and paraphrased statements from participants included in this paper.

Measures

Survey Questions

The 32 questions measuring respondents' perceptions of compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and employee engagement were selected from established, previously validated scales each with a Cronbach's alpha of at least $\alpha = 0.70$.[5]

1. **Compassionate Leader Behavior Index (CLBI).** The survey included twelve of twenty-four questions in the Shuck et al. (2019) CLBI scale to measure employees' perceptions of compassionate leadership behaviours in their workplace.
2. **Psychological Safety Scale.** The survey included all seven questions in the Edmondson (1999) Psychological Safety Scale to measure employees' perceptions of psychological safety as part of their teams in their respective workplaces.
3. **Symmetrical Internal Communication Scale**. The survey included four out of six questions in the Dozier et al., (1995) Symmetrical Internal Communication scale used to measure the degree to which employees perceive symmetrical internal communication activities and behaviours from their leader(s) and as a part of their teams in the workplace.
4. **Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES)**. The survey included nine of seventeen questions in the Schaufeli et al., (2006) UWES scale to measure the degree to which respondents feel engaged in their work. This shortened nine-question scale is commonly used and referred to as the UWES-9 (Martin, 2017).

For each set of questions selected for inclusion in this survey, the Cronbach's Alpha was calculated to assess the internal consistency before proceeding with this study – measuring how well each set of questions reliably measures the same underlying construct. As shown in Table 1, the results indicate that for each set of questions selected to measure the constructs explored in this study, all demonstrate high internal consistency.[6]

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[5] Cronbach's alpha is a widely used measure of internal consistency reliability in research to assess how well questions in a survey scale measure an underlying concept. Anything at or above $\alpha = 0.70$ is commonly considered acceptable for research, with a higher alpha scale indicating higher internal consistency and reliability of the scale (Kamis & Lynch, 2020)

[6] The Cronbach's Alpha values indicate that the questions selected to measure each construct are highly correlated, supporting the reliability and internal consistency of the measurements for each respective construct (Kamis & Lynch, 2020).

Table 1

Online Survey – Questions and Scales by Category (N=265)

# of Items	Questions Category	Survey Scale	Cronbach's Alpha
7	Consent, Screening and Demographic	-	-
9	Work Engagement	UWES-9 (Schaufeli et al., 2006)	α = 0.898
7	Psychological Safety	(Edmondson, 1999)	α = 0.875
12	Compassionate Leadership	(Shuck et al., 2019)	α = 0.973
4	Symmetrical Internal Communication	(Dozier et al. 1995; Kim, 2007)	α = 0.846
2	Interest in Interview and Submit	-	-

Note. (-) means n/a

Data Analysis - Quantitative

Composite Score

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), composite scores were created for the four survey scales measuring participants' perceptions of compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and employee engagement within their workplace environments.[7] The composite scores for each construct were computed by aggregating participant responses to individual survey items within the respective scales. The calculation was performed using the formula:

$$Composite\ Value = \frac{Sum\ of\ Individual\ Items}{Number\ of\ Items}$$

This process yielded a single composite score for each participant, for each construct. The resulting composite values were then ready for use in subsequent data analyses to explore relationships between the constructs and test the study's hypotheses.

Pearson Correlation Analysis

The bivariate Pearson correlation was used in SPSS to assess H1, H2, and H4 as it measures the strength and direction (positive or negative) of the relationship between the constructs in each hypothesis (Kent State University, 2023).

Mediation Analysis

The Andrew Hayes PROCESS macro for SPSS was used to conduct a mediation analysis to test hypotheses H3 and H5. The PROCESS macro is an "observed variable OLS and logistic

[7] This process of consolidating all the Likert scale responses for each scale into a composite score mitigates the potential variability and measurement error associated with individual questions and provides a more reliable representation and measurement of the constructs (Sullivan & Artino, 2013). Further, the robust to high Cronbach's alpha values imply internal consistency among the combined questions assessing each construct, affirming the reliability of the measurements, and thereby bolstering confidence in employing composite scores for subsequent analysis (What are composite scores, 2024).

regression path analysis modelling tool…widely used through the social, business, and health sciences" (Hayes, 2023, para. 1).

Data Analysis - Qualitative

A thematic analysis of the ten anonymized interview transcripts was completed using the qualitative analysis software program NVIVO. The anonymized participant responses were first organized and grouped by question for an initial review. Each interview question was open-ended to elicit discussion and better understand the participant's experience of compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and work engagement. Each participant's overall sentiment toward their supervisor and workplace was measured as either positive or negative, and any patterns in themes and relationships between the constructs were coded, and analysis was done to consider what patterns and themes in the participants' data support or conflict with the study's hypotheses.

Limitations of Methodology

The use of convenience sampling for this study introduced selection bias in that the sample relied on individuals' access, availability, and interest in and willingness to participate rather than random selection (Convenience sampling, 2024). As such, the generalizability of the findings may not be as reliable since the sample may not be as representative of the broader population being studied as it could be (Dillman et al., 2014). For those participants who were reached via snowball sampling, there is the possibility of chain-referral bias since at least some of the sample ended up participating because they were asked to or were referred to the survey, which might lead to homogeneity in the sample and not an accurate representation of the population (Erickson, 1979; Heckathorn, 2002). With more time and resources, using probability sampling methods for this study might have contributed to more generalizable results.

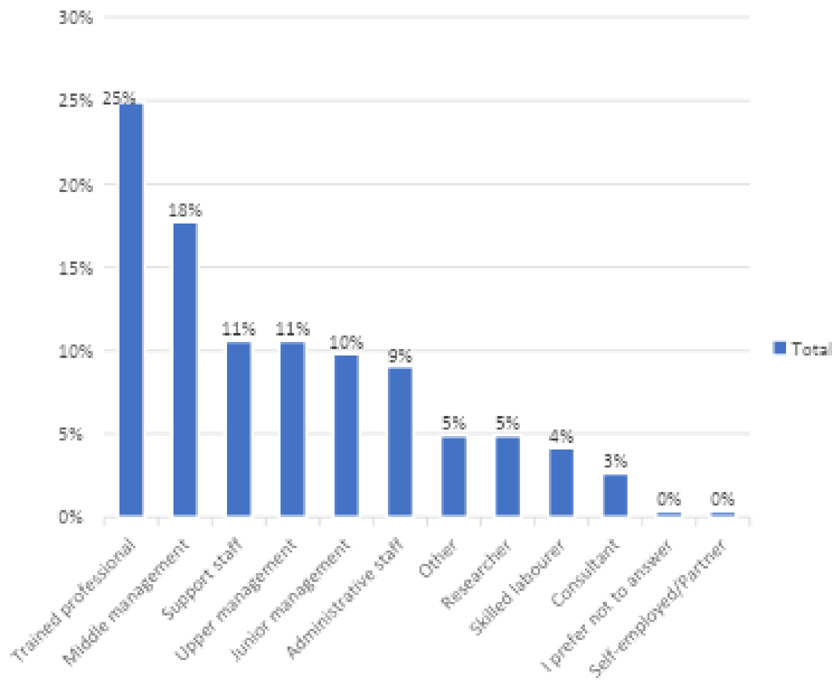
Results

Participant Demographics

A significant majority of survey participant sample (N = 265) identified as currently working full-time, and in Canada. 80% of survey participants (n = 213) identified as currently employed in Canada, with the remaining twenty percent (n = 52) employed in the United States. Further, 80% of all participants indicated that they are working full-time (n = 213), with the remaining working part-time (n = 41) or contract (n = 10) (see Figure 3) in professional fields such as health care and social assistance (n = 68), educational services (n = 54) and professional, scientific, and technical services (n = 29).

29% identified as middle management and upper management, 25% as a trained professional and 11% as support staff (See Figure 2).

Figure 2
Role in Industry



93% (n = 247) of the sample indicated that their role includes a high level of teamwork and collaboration, with the remaining 7% (n = 18) having roles that sometimes include teamwork and collaboration. 63% of all survey participants were Millennials (n = 116) and Generation Z (n = 49). The remaining 37% of participants were comprised of Generation X (n = 67), Boomers (n = 32) and the Silent Generation (n = 1) (see Figure 7).

The majority of participants can be generalized as Millennial and Generation Z full-time employees currently working in Canada in healthcare, educational, professional, scientific, and technical services industries, within roles that include a significant amount of teamwork and collaboration.

H1: Compassionate leadership will have a positive relationship with symmetrical internal communication.

Quantitative. In exploring the link between compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication, the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was calculated, revealing $r(265) = .853$, $p < .001$. These results suggest that as compassionate leadership increases, there is a corresponding increase in symmetrical internal communication, supporting the hypothesis.[8]

[8] To ensure the reliability of these findings, a 95% bootstrap Confidence Interval (CI) of [.816, .882] was calculated. The results show that there is a 95% confidence that the correlation (r) between compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication falls between .816 and .882 (The Pennsylvania State University, 2023). Further, the narrowness of the confidence interval calculated suggests a high precision level in the estimate of r (Statistics Solutions, 2024).

Also calculated was the coefficient of determination ($R^2 = .727$) to measure the extent of the association between compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication. The R^2 suggests that approximately 72.7% of the variance in symmetrical internal communication is associated with variations in compassionate leadership. This significant proportion shows the strong association between compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication, highlighting how closely these variables are related.

Qualitative. The thematic analysis of interview responses revealed further insights into the role of compassionate leadership and its relationship with symmetrical internal communication within the workplace. Notably, 80% of interviewees provided accounts that align with the hypothesis that compassionate leadership has a positive relationship with symmetrical internal communication. Of that total, sentiments towards supervisors and the workplace were mixed, with half expressing positive views and the other half sharing negative perceptions of their supervisor and workplace.

The interview respondents who had an overall positive sentiment toward their supervisor and workplace described their respective supervisors as leaders who are understanding, caring, supportive and accommodating in challenging situations. The communication with their supervisor was described as symmetrical, two-way, and regularly occurring - experienced as comfortable and open, with the supervisor demonstrating a willingness to listen to them and show responsiveness to their feedback and needs. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that characteristics of two-way symmetrical internal communication such as mutual respect and trust, openness and transparency, employee empowerment and enhanced participation seem to correlate with supervisors who also embody compassionate leadership behaviours such as presence (listening attentively), empathy, accountability, and integrity.

Conversely, respondents who expressed an overall negative sentiment toward their supervisors and workplace generally described their supervisors as leaders who seemed to lack expressions of genuine care, understanding and empathy toward staff. Some shared examples of how their supervisors have shut down communication, refused to listen, and demonstrated a lack of integrity (e.g., saying one thing and doing another). Compassionate leadership behaviours seem to be correlated with environments where open, two-way communication flourishes, contributing to a positive sentiment toward the supervisor and workplace, suggesting a relationship to employee satisfaction and engagement. Conversely, the absence of these qualities seems to contribute to negative workplace sentiment and experiences, characterized by a lack of caring, integrity, trust and open symmetrical communication.

H2: Compassionate leadership will have a positive relationship with psychological safety.

Quantitative. As part of investigating the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety, the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was used to measure the strength and direction of their linear association. SPSS analysis revealed *a* $r(265) = .724$, $p < .01$ indicating a strong positive, significant relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety. The results suggest that as compassionate leadership increases, there is a corresponding increase in psychological safety, supporting H2.[9]

The coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.523$ indicates that approximately 52.3% of the variability in psychological safety can be directly attributed to variations in compassionate

[9] To further ensure the reliability of these findings, a 95% bootstrap CI [.661,.776] was calculated. The narrow precision of this confidence interval suggests a high level of certainty in the estimate of *r* (Statistics Solutions, 2024).

leadership. This proportion shows the strong association between compassionate leadership and psychological safety, highlighting the extent to which these variables move together.[10]

Qualitative. Eighty percent of the interview respondents shared observations and experiences in their workplaces, which support the notion that compassionate leadership has a positive relationship with psychological safety. Half of those expressed an overall positive sentiment toward their supervisor and workplace, with the other half expressing an overall negative sentiment.

Those who expressed a positive sentiment toward their manager and employer described work environments that include regular team meetings where concerns, ideas and thoughts are freely shared without fear. Supervisors were described as warm, approachable, open, and willing to have informal chats, get to know their staff, and listen - signalling that they value and want to hear from and take into consideration the expertise and contributions of their staff - signs of both compassionate leadership and a psychologically safe environment

Conversely, those who expressed an overall negative sentiment toward their supervisor and workplace perceived their supervisors as leaders who say one thing and do another, lack empathy and integrity, don't take the time to listen, and, in several cases create an environment where they and other team members feel afraid to speak up and share ideas freely, suggesting a lack of both compassionate leadership and psychological safety.

Compassionate leadership behaviours seem to be correlated with a psychologically safe environment where open communication, support for risk-taking, respect, and tolerance for error flourish, contributing to positive sentiment toward the supervisor and workplace, suggesting a relationship to employee satisfaction and engagement. Conversely, the absence of compassionate leadership behaviours and signs of psychological safety seems to contribute to negative workplace sentiment and experiences, characterized by a lack of support for risk-taking, tolerance for error, caring, integrity, trust, authenticity, presence, and open communication in the workplace.

H3: Symmetrical internal communication mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety.

To test this hypothesis, a mediation analysis was conducted using the Hayes Process Model (Model 4), with compassionate leadership as the independent variable, psychological safety as the dependent variable, and symmetrical internal communication serving as the mediator (See Table 2).

Table 2

H3 – Andrew Hayes Process Model Results (N = 265)

Variable Relationship	**(β)**	**(p)**	**95% (CI)**	**R^2**
Compassionate Leadership -> Symmetrical Internal Communication	.8734	< .001	[.8084, .9384]	.7269
Compassionate Leadership -> Psychological Safety (Direct)	.2734	< .001	[.1562, .3907]	.5748
Symmetrical Internal Communication -> Psychological Safety	.3269	< .001	[.2124, .4413]	-

[10] A strong correlation does not imply causation.

Variable Relationship	(*β*)	(p)	95% (CI)	R^2
Compassionate Leadership -> Psychological Safety (Indirect via Symmetrical Internal Communication)	.2855	-	[.1766, .3910]	-

Note. All p-values are two-tailed; (-) means n/a

The analysis showed a significant association between compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication, with compassionate leadership serving as a strong predictor of symmetrical internal communication levels (β = .8734, p < .001, two-tailed, N = 265). Further, the regression model accounted for a significant amount of the variance in symmetrical internal communication (R^2=.7269), indicating that compassionate leadership is strongly correlated with enhanced levels of symmetrical internal communication.

Further analysis revealed that compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication are significantly associated with psychological safety. The direct effect of compassionate leadership on psychological safety is significant (β = .2734, p < .001, two-tailed, N = 265), even when controlling for symmetrical internal communication. Symmetrical internal communication also has a significant positive association with psychological safety (β = .3269, p < .001, two-tailed, N = 265), suggesting that higher levels of symmetrical communication are linked to increased psychological safety among employees.

The indirect effect of compassionate leadership on psychological safety, mediated by symmetrical internal communication is significant (β = .2855, 95% CI [.1766 to .3910]). This finding indicates that symmetrical internal communication serves as a partial mediator in the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety, supporting the notion that the positive impact of compassionate leadership on psychological safety may be facilitated through enhanced symmetrical internal communication.

Qualitative. In support of the quantitative findings, 60% of the interview participants shared perceptions and anecdotes of workplace experiences that lend varying degrees of support to symmetrical internal communication as a partial mediator of the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety (See Appendix E, Table 6).

For example, R1 described their supervisor as a compassionate leader, demonstrating care, understanding and empathy who contributes to creating psychological safety in their workplace, an environment where they feel comfortable expressing their ideas and taking interpersonal risks. For example, if R1 has a problem with a project or an idea to take work in a new direction, R1 feels comfortable bringing that to their supervisor. R1 and their supervisor engage in open, transparent, two-way communication, including regular meetings where they learn about the plans of the organization and where they feel safe to share mistakes, ask questions and seek guidance – all indicative of a work environment where compassionate leadership behaviours contribute to psychological safety directly, as well as indirectly through symmetrical internal communication practices.

In summary, the quantitative results show that symmetrical internal communication partially mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety. More specifically, the results indicate that compassionate leadership contributes to psychological safety directly and indirectly through its positive effect on symmetrical internal communication. This mediation model explains 57.48% of the variance in psychological safety (R^2=.5748), highlighting the potential role of compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication practices in fostering psychological safety. The qualitative interview results provided some contextual, lived experience supporting the quantitative findings. The statistical significance of the direct and indirect effects ($p < .001$) confirms that the relationship observed is not by chance, supporting H3.

H4: Compassionate leadership positively influences employee engagement.

In exploring the relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement, the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) was calculated to measure the strength and direction of their linear association. SPSS analysis revealed r (265) = .466, $p < .001$, indicating a statistically significant, moderately positive linear relationship. While this suggests a relationship where increases in compassionate leadership are associated with increases in employee engagement, supporting H4, it is important to note that this correlation does not establish causality.[11]

These results affirm the substantial potential influence of compassionate leadership on employee engagement. That said, the fact that compassionate leadership explains about 21.8% of the variance also suggests that other unexamined variables that are not captured here also significantly contribute to employee engagement.

Qualitative. For further insight a thematic analysis of the interviews was completed. 80% of the interview respondents shared observations and experiences in their workplaces, which in varying degrees support the notion that compassionate leadership behaviours (or lack of) have an influence on employee engagement. 30% of those respondents expressed an overall positive sentiment toward their supervisor and workplace, with the remaining 50% expressing an overall negative sentiment.

For respondents who shared a lack of compassionate leadership behaviours, this seemed to coincide to some degree with signs of lower employee engagement, suggesting a negative correlation, which also lends some degree of support for the hypothesis that compassionate leadership positively influences employee engagement.

H5: Psychological safety mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement.

To test Hypothesis 5, a mediation analysis was conducted using the Hayes Process Model (Model 4), with compassionate leadership as the independent variable, employee engagement as the dependent variable, and psychological safety serving as the mediator.

Compassionate Leadership and Psychological Safety. A regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety. The results indicated a significant positive effect of compassionate leadership on psychological safety ($\beta = .5589$, $p < .001$, two-tailed, N = 265). This model explains 52.35% of the variance in psychological safety ($R^2 = .5235$), suggesting that compassionate leadership is strongly associated with psychological safety among employees.

Compassionate Leadership and Employee Engagement. Further analysis revealed that the direct effect of compassionate leadership on employee engagement was found to be statistically significant ($\beta = .0937$, $p = .0465$, two-tailed, N = 265), indicating that higher levels of compassionate leadership are associated with increased employee engagement. This effect is observed even when controlling for psychological safety, suggesting that compassionate leadership may have a positive direct influence on employee engagement.

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[11] To confirm the consistency of the estimate, a 95% confidence interval of [.367, .556] provides additional support for the positive relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement. Further, the calculated coefficient of determination ($R^2 = .218$) indicates that compassionate leadership accounts for approximately 21.8% of the variance in employee engagement.

Psychological Safety and Employee Engagement. The effect of psychological safety on employee engagement was also significant ($\beta = .3579$, $p < .001$, two-tailed, N = 265), supporting the notion that psychological safety influences employee engagement.

Indirect Effect of Compassionate Leadership on Employee Engagement. The analysis also examined the indirect effect of compassionate leadership on employee engagement, mediated by psychological safety, using bootstrap confidence intervals. The results indicated a significant indirect effect ($\beta = .2001$, 95% CI [.1126 to .2908], N = 265), with the confidence interval above zero suggesting that psychological safety partially mediates the positive relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement. This finding provides evidence supporting the hypothesized mediation model, H5.

The results of these analyses are summarized in Table 3, which presents the relationships between variables, coefficients, p-values, confidence intervals, and the proportion of variance explained in psychological safety and employee engagement.

Table 3
H5 – Andrew Hayes Process Model results

Variable Relationship	***(β)***	***(r)***	***95% (CI)***	***R^2***
Compassionate Leadership -> Psychological Safety	.5589	<.001	[.4942, .6237]	.5235
Compassionate Leadership -> Employee Engagement (Direct)	.0937	.0465	[.0015, .1859]	.3094
Psychological Safety -> Employee Engagement	.3579	<.001	[.2385, .4773]	-
Compassionate Leadership -> Employee Engagement (Indirect via Psychological Safety)	.2001	-	[.1126, .2908]	-

*Note***.** All p-values are two-tailed; (-) means n/a

Qualitative. Qualitative data from interviews further supported the quantitative findings, with 80% of respondents providing narratives that suggest the role of psychological safety as a mediator in the relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement. For example, R4 shared how their supervisor's behaviour of listening attentively contributes to a supportive and safe environment where they feel comfortable expressing their ideas and taking interpersonal risks. An example shared was when R4 felt comfortable advocating to their supervisor about too much workload being assigned to a team member because another team member was underperforming. R4's supervisor responded with compassionate leadership behaviours, such as empathy, presence, and authenticity, in creating a psychologically safe space for R4 to feel comfortable to speak up and share difficult feedback. R4's action in support of their team member hints at their dedication to their role and the organization, a key aspect of work engagement, which seems to be partly fostered by the environment's psychological safety and nurtured by their supervisor's compassionate leadership behaviours.

Conversely, R3 described their supervisor as a leader who doesn't demonstrate care, understanding and empathy toward employees in the workplace, contributing to R3's high levels of stress, an increased workload due to high turnover, and people on the team being afraid to speak up (lack of psychological safety). Interestingly, R3 describes their supervisor as someone who thinks they lead with care and understanding but is perceived as a leader who instead says one thing and does another. R3 described their supervisor as someone lacking in compassionate leadership behaviours such as integrity, presence, empathy, and dignity. R3 explains, “I’m on sick leave right now, partially because I’m stressed out because of a lot of this and the fact that we have a high turnover…It’s too bad because we’ve lost some great people”. Consequently, R3’s level of work engagement appears to be negatively impacted by the lack of psychological safety in the environment and the lack of compassionate leadership behaviour demonstrated by the supervisor leading the team.

Similar to R2 and R3, who speak of supervisors who say one thing and do another, R6 describes their supervisor as someone who talks about how they are caring, understanding, and supportive of open dialogue but demonstrates through their actions the opposite. R6 describes their supervisor as architecting a workplace environment where the team is afraid to speak up and provide feedback. R6 shared, “I advocated to try and adjust the expectations because the team could not maintain this level of work. I told her it was negatively affecting the well-being of the team. And the response from my supervisor was, so you’re telling me that you think I’m bad at my job?” The defensiveness of R6’s supervisor and inability to listen, handle suggestions, feedback, open dialogue, and difficult conversations suggest a lack of compassionate leadership such as integrity, accountability, presence, empathy, authenticity, and dignity, which seems to be connected to the low level of psychological safety and engagement in the workplace environment. As R6 puts it, “I don’t feel that I can express my ideas or take risks. I feel like I’m walking on eggshells all the time”. R6 further noted that their sense of work engagement is limited when fulfilling duties assigned by their supervisor. They describe fulfilling those duties but note that their emotional investment is limited, prioritizing meaningful work that is aligned with their values and limiting effort on tasks they could potentially support that are outside of their core interests.

In conclusion, the quantitative results indicate that psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement. Specifically, the findings suggest that compassionate leadership contributes to employee engagement directly and indirectly through its positive effect on psychological safety. This mediation model explains a statistically significant proportion of the variance in employee engagement, suggesting the critical role of compassionate leadership and psychological safety practices in enhancing employee engagement. The qualitative data from the interviews provides some contextual support for these findings. The statistical significance of both direct and indirect effects and the qualitative interviews support Hypothesis 5.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Results

This study shows a significant relationship between compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication ($r = .853$, $p < .001$, two-tailed, N = 265), psychological safety ($r = .724$, $p < .001$, two-tailed, N = 265), and employee engagement (r = .466, p < .001, two-tailed, N = 265). Mediation analysis suggests that symmetrical internal communication partially mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety, and psychological safety partially mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement. Qualitative findings from the interviews complement these results in varying degrees, with employee narratives sharing experiences that range from the positive impacts of working under compassionate leadership to the challenges faced in environments where such leadership qualities seem to be absent.

Discussion

This study supports the notion that compassionate leadership—characterized by behaviours such as empathy, integrity, and a focus on the well-being of staff in the workplace—may contribute to fostering high-performing work environments (Depow et al., 2023; Lilius et al., 2008). Results show significant correlations between compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication ($r = .853$, $p < .001$), psychological safety ($r = .724$, $p < .001$), and employee engagement ($r = .466$, $p < .001$), suggesting these constructs are closely associated. Symmetrical internal communication partially mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and psychological safety (ß = .2855, 95% CI [.1766 to .3910]), indicating that compassionate leadership may strengthen psychological safety through its influence on open, two-way symmetrical internal communication. Similarly, psychological safety mediates the relationship between compassionate leadership and employee engagement. This mediation includes both direct effects (ß = .2734, $p < .001$) of compassionate leadership on psychological safety and indirect effects, where symmetrical internal communication serves as a potential pathway connecting compassionate leadership to psychological safety and, subsequently, to employee engagement.

The strong correlation between compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication highlights the importance of empathy, transparency, and accountability in leadership communication strategies (Hougaard & Carter, 2022; Shuck et al., 2019). Communications professionals can apply these findings to develop management training programs that promote compassionate leadership, enhance symmetrical internal communication, and foster psychological safety – factors that may together support higher levels of employee engagement. Compassionate leadership management training may include guidance on responding to employee feedback with empathy and support, encouraging open discussions about challenges and failures, and recognizing and rewarding employees for speaking up and contributing to continuous improvement (Clark, 2020; Edmondson, 2019).

In conclusion, this study provides insights for communications management professionals, leaders, and organizations looking to explore enhancing employee engagement through management leadership training and communication practices. By prioritizing compassionate leadership and symmetrical internal communication, organizations can foster psychological safety, enhance employee engagement and ultimately strengthen team innovation and organizational effectiveness.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study's use of convenience and snowball sampling limits the generalizability of the findings and its reliance on self-reported perception data limits what can be inferred from the results. Future research could benefit from a larger, more diverse sample across a variety of industries and cultural contexts to test the applicability of these findings more broadly. Additionally, longitudinal studies could offer a deeper understanding of the relationships between compassionate leadership, symmetrical internal communication, psychological safety, and employee engagement over time.

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Serving Multicultural Publics: Assessing the Role of Dialogic Communication and Cultural Tailoring Strategies of GenAI Chatbots in Government OPRs for Disasters

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Abstract

The use of GenAI chatbots has been on the rise in public relations research and practices. By supporting personalized dialogues and culturally relevant communication, chatbots provide new opportunities to improve organization-public communication, particularly in a disaster preparation context. Integrating research on cultural tailoring and a dialogic communication approach of OPRs, the current study proposes cultural tailoring as a novel pathway through which GenAI chatbots can help foster strong organization-public relationships. With a between subjects experiment with 293 Black and Hispanic residents of Florida who interacted with an original prototype of generative AI (GenAI) chatbots on hurricane preparedness, the study finds that perceived cultural tailoring of chatbots significantly improves the level of dialogic mutuality, which serves as a strong mediating mechanism leading to better OPR quality. In addition, the study finds that community members' pre-existing trust in public agencies negatively moderates the relationships between cultural tailoring, dialogic communication, and OPR quality, highlighting the significance of employing culturally relevant communication in weaker or more precarious OPR relationships.

Keywords: GenAI chatbots, dialogic communication, cultural tailoring, organization public disaster communication, government OPRs.

Serving Multicultural Publics: Assessing the Role of Dialogic Communication and Cultural Tailoring Strategies of GenAI Chatbots in Government OPRs for Disasters

Building strong organization-public relationships (OPR) has increasingly become a cornerstone for effective crisis management. A robust OPR has been shown to predict various positive crisis management outcomes, including increased disaster coping efficacy (e.g., Liu & Ni, 2021), positive word-of-mouth (Wang et al., 2022), and reduced blame attribution (e.g., Hung-Baesecke & Chen, 2013). These benefits are particularly salient in multiethnic communities, as miniority communities are disproportionately more vulnerable to crises such as natural disasters (Bolin & Kurtz, 2018). In addition, multiethnic communities face compounded challenges in disaster communication due to historically lower trust in public institutions (Tyler, 2001). For instance, compared to other populations, African American and Hispanic communities are less likely to trust or rely on government agency sources for crisis information (Liu & Zhao, 2023). Addressing these disparities underscores the importance of adopting more tailored approaches in crisis communication and organization-public relationship-building efforts.

The rise of multiethnic communities has also expanded the scope of OPR research, placing culture at the forefront of relationship management. Scholars have increasingly examined OPR within multicultural and multiethnic contexts, providing critical insights into how cultural differences shape public perceptions and interactions with organizations (e.g., Haigh, 2011; Jiang & Wei, 2013; Ni et al., 2018; Liu & Ni, 2021). While these studies underscore the importance of culturally tailored communication strategies, significant gaps remain in understanding how to effectively build and maintain strong OPR in diverse communities. Specifically, existing research has yet to fully explore the potential of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), to address these challenges.

This study bridges these gaps by exploring the role of culturally tailored generative AI (GenAI) chatbots in strengthening OPR in a disaster preparation context. It contributes to the burgeoning research on AI, multicultural OPR, and dialogic communication in two ways. First, it introduces cultural tailoring (Lapinski et al., 2024) as a fundamental component of multicultural OPR, emphasizing the need to customize communication—from the source to the content of the message— to align with the diverse values and experiences of ethnic community members. Second, the study explores how AI-powered tools, specifically culturally tailored chatbots, can enhance OPR through dialogic interactions. Dialogic communication theory suggests that sustained and effective dialogue is critical for relationship-building (Bruning et al., 2008). The current study is among the first to systematically assess the efficacy of AI-powered chatbots in enabling dialogic communication and improve OPR ouctomes in a disaster preparation context.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, it reviews relevant literature on organization-public dialogic communication (OPDC) and culture tailoring in crisis management, proposing an integrated theoretical model where dialogic communication mediates the relationships between culturally tailored communication and OPR outcomes. Next, with a between-subjects experiment with 293 Black and Hispanic residents of Florida, the study offers an empirical assessment of the efficacy of a culturally tailored GenAI chatbot prototype in improving OPR. Finally, the study concludes by discussing implications for theory and practice, highlighting the transformative potential of using culturally tailored AI chatbots in enhancing OPR and crisis management outcomes among multiethnic communities.

Literature Review

Organization-Public Dialogic Communication (OPDC)

Defined as "the orientation of mutuality and the climate of openness that an organization and its publics hold in communication to bring about mutually beneficial relationships" (Yang et al., 2015, p. 176), Organization-Public Dialogic Communication (OPDC) emphasizes the importance of two-way, symmetrical communication between organizations and their publics. Central to the OPDC framework are two core elements, *orientation of mutuality* and *climate of openness*. Mutuality involves the mutual confirmation of unique values among communication parties (Kent & Taylor, 2002), characterized by six attributes including grounding, collaboration, confirmed quality, responsiveness, respect, and empathy (Yang et al., 2015). Openness, meanwhile, pertains to the willingness of organizations and their publics to engage in genuine and transparent communication, characterized by accessibility, authenticity, and clarity (Yang et al., 2015).

OPDC is closely tied to organization-public relationship (OPR) theory, as both are grounded in interpersonal communication principles. Bruning and Ledingham (2002) contend that effective relationship management in public relations requires the application of interpersonal communication axioms, including mutual respect, active listening, and trust building. Building upon this framework, Bruning, Dials, and Shirka (2008) demonstrated the transformative role of dialogues in strengthening organization-public relationships. Their research indicated that both relationship attitudes and dialogue positively influence public evaluations and intended behaviors toward an organization.

Extending traditional public relations practices, OPDC principles have been applied across multiple domains, such as internal communication (e.g., Lee, 2022), crisis communication (e.g., Yang, 2018), and digital engagement (e.g., Zhou & Xu, 2022). Across these subfields, there is compelling evidence highlighting the strong and positive relationship between dialogic communication and improved organization-public relationships. For instance, Zhou and Xu (2022) examined how media affordances influenced the implementation of dialogic communication, finding that digital platforms enhanced transparency and responsiveness, thereby strengthening public trust and engagement. Similarly, Park and Kang (2020) explored crowdsourcing initiatives in corporate social responsibility, finding that dialogic communication fostered trust and relational commitment among stakeholders. Yang (2018) investigated dialogic competency during the MERS outbreak, emphasizing its critical role in influencing public trust and political legitimacy. Finally, Lee (2022) demonstrated that fostering a dialogic environment in internal organizational settings enhanced employee safety behaviors during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the rise of digital technologies, recent scholarship has explored how various digital platforms—ranging from websites, social media, to generative AI technologies—can foster dialogic communication and improve OPR outcomes (e.g., Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). For example, Jiang et al. (2022) found that AI-powered chatbots, through their responsiveness and conversational tone, significantly enhanced customer satisfaction and social engagement.

GenAI chatbots are uniquely equipped for dialogic communication due to several key technological affordances. These affordances enable chatbots to not only function as communication tools, but also contribute to the quality of organization-public relationships. First, GenAI chatbots afford real-time interactions and the delivery of timely responses, which creates a strong sense of availability and responsiveness. The immediacy enabled by this affordance supports dialogic communication by fostering the perception of attentiveness and presence, which are critical components of effective interpersonal and organizational relationships.

Research has shown that such responsiveness plays a pivotal role in improving customer relationship management, as it signals care and attentiveness to the needs of stakeholders (Sofiyah et al., 2024). This affordance exemplifies the "temporal immediacy" (Green at al., 2013, p. 140) characteristic of GenAI technologies, which bridges gaps in time and space to support closer interactions.

Second, GenAI chatbots afford customized communication by tailoring responses to individual preferences. This adaptability enhances the quality of interactions by demonstrating empathy, respect, and a personalized understanding of user needs. Such personalized responsiveness can not only improve the user experience but also foster a sense of relational closeness, a cornerstone of dialogic communication (Lakshmikanth et al., 2024).

Finally, GenAI chatbots afford proactive engagement, allowing organizations to move beyond reactive communication. Proactive communication can be particularly instrumental in organizations' crisis responses (Rim & Ferguson, 2020). By leveraging AI's capabilities to monitor public sentiments and predict emerging concerns, GenAI chatbots can initiate conversations and address issues before they escalate. In sum, proactive communication not only mitigates risks but also improves trust and overall relationships with the public.

Having discussed the potential of GenAI technologies in fostering dialogic communication, we turn to a specific mechanism, cultural tailoring, that can play a crucial role in building relationships with multicultural publics.

Assessing the Role of Cultural Tailoring Strategies

Cultural tailoring refers to "the creation of communication interventions or messages aligned with the needs and preferences of individuals based on cultural characteristics" (Lapinski et al., 2024, p. 1). Cultural tailoring strategies have been applied across various fields such as health promotion (e.g., Heo & Braun, 2014) and environmental communication (Lapinski & Oetzel, 2021). Despite its broad application, the term often suffers from conceptual ambiguity and is sometimes conflated with a related concept: targeting. According to Lapinski et al. (2024), targeting involves segmenting populations based on group-level characteristics, whereas tailoring offers a more individualized approach, creating communication patterns unique to each person.

Cultural tailoring can vary in depth, ranging from surface-level efforts—such as incorporating familiar imagery, settings, and languages—to deeper engagement with underlying sociocultural values (Ringwalt & Bliss, 2006). Research indicates that the most effective cultural tailoring integrates deeply with the cultural and social routines of the intended audience. For instance, Elder et al. (2009) demonstrated that a culturally tailored nutrition program for Latinas was most successful when paired with promotoras—trusted community health workers who leverage their cultural knowledge to deliver health education and resources.

Although the field continues to grapple with the specific conceptualization of cultural tailoring, scholars acknowledge the multidimensional nature of this concept (Lapinski et al., 2024), emphasizing that cultural tailoring extends beyond a simple content-matching process (Hawkins et al., 2008). Instead, cultural tailoring encompasses a series of steps, including public segmentation, community outreach strategies, message design, and the distribution of tailored materials. Along this line, Yuen (2014) identified key components of cultural tailoring ranging from the consideration of ethnic identity, language use, delivery style tailored to cultural factors, to a combination of these elements. At the content level, much of the research has focused on crafting messages designed to maximize persuasiveness (Huang & Shen, 2016).

By emulating the communication style of cultural insiders, human-AI chatbot interactions can foster in-group identification and a sense of cultural alignment through persona cues, culturally relevant topics, and linguistic elements like dialects or ethnic vernaculars (Zhao et al., 2024). This perceived similarity can heighten the salience and relevance of the information, leading to deeper cognitive engagement and more effective disaster preparedness, as outlined by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Briñol, 2011; Griffith et al., 2024).

Alternatively, the Theory of Situated Cognition (Oyserman et al., 2009) suggests that culturally tailored cues can activate specific cultural mindsets, enhancing message processing and promoting attitudinal and behavioral shifts (Huang & Shen, 2016).

Mutuality involves reciprocity and shared understanding between parties, which is bolstered when communication acknowledges and respects cultural nuances. Openness reflects transparency and willingness to engage, which cultural tailoring facilitates by addressing cultural barriers to understanding and fostering inclusivity. Theories such as the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty & Briñol, 2011) suggest that messages perceived as more relevant and congruent with one's cultural identity are processed more centrally, leading to greater engagement and responsiveness. When individuals perceive communication as culturally tailored, they are more likely to feel recognized and valued, promoting dialogic communication dimensions such as mutuality and openness. To test this mechanism, we propose:

> **H1:** Manipulated cultural tailoring increases perceived cultural tailoring, which in turn increases organization-public dialogic communication, including (a) mutuality and (b) openness.

Trust as a Moderating Factor

While cultural tailoring has been shown as an effective strategy for enhancing mutuality and openness in organization-public relationships, its effectiveness may not be uniform across all individuals. In particular, we posit that organizational trust may serve as a critical moderating mechanism between cultural tailoring and dialogic communication outcomes. Trust in an organization plays a critical role in shaping how stakeholders perceive and respond to tailored communication efforts (Crane, 2020). Social Exchange Theory (SET, Blau, 1964) posits that social behavior is driven by an exchange process that seeks to maximize benefits and minimize costs. During this process, trust directly enhances individuals' willingness to engage in reciprocal relationships (Ostrom, 2003). For individuals with high pre-existing trust, cultural tailoring is likely to reinforce positive perceptions of mutuality and openness, as they are predisposed to view the organization's efforts as genuine and sincere.

In contrast, for individuals with low trust, the impact of cultural tailoring may be weakened. Low-trust stakeholders are more likely to approach tailored communication with skepticism, potentially perceiving it as insincere or manipulative. This aligns with confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), which suggests that individuals tend to interpret new information in ways that confirm their existing beliefs or attitudes. For low-trust individuals, cultural tailoring may fail to establish mutuality or openness. Instead, stakeholders may interpret tailored messages as superficial or as attempts to mask underlying inadequacies in the organization's commitment to their community.

To test the moderating effects of pre-existing trust in organizations, we propose the following set of hypotheses:

> **H2:** Pre-existing trust in the agency moderates the relationship between perceived cultural tailoring and mutuality, such that among those with

lowertrust, the relationship between cultural tailoring and mutuality is weaker.

H3: Pre-existing trust the agency moderates the relationship between perceived cultural tailoring and openness, such that among those with lower trust, the relationship between cultural tailoring and openness is weaker.

Finally, our theoretical model (see Figure 1) investigates the relationship between dialogic communication components, mutuality and openness, and OPR outcomes. We posit that when stakeholders perceive mutuality, they are more likely to feel a stronger bond with the organization, resulting in increased satisfaction, trust, commitment, and control mutuality. Openness, characterized by transparency and honest communication (Yang et al., 2015), is another critical factor in building effective relationships. Transparent communication allows stakeholders to feel informed and empowered, which increases their sense of control over the relationship as well as overall satisfaction.

To test the direct relationship between the two dialogic communication dimensions and OPR outcomes, we propose the last set of hypotheses:

H4a: Mutuality increases OPR outcomes, including trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality.

H4b: Openness increases OPR outcomes, including trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality.

Methods

Upon receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, we conducted an online between-subjects experiment from February to March 2024. Participants from Florida were recruited via Prolific and directed to a Qualtrics survey, where they provided consent and reported their primary racial/ethnic identity. Participants were randomly assigned to interact with either a culturally tailored GPT-4 chatbot matching their racial/ethnic identity or a non-tailored control chatbot. Participants interacted with their assigned chatbot for at least five minutes before completing a follow-up Qualtrics survey assessing key outcome variables, such as dialogic communication and OPRs. Finally, they were debriefed, compensated, and given links to emergency response resources from federal and state agencies.

Participants

Given our focus on vulnerable communities for hurricane preparedness, our Florida resident sample consists of Black and Hispanic community members aged 18 or above. The final sample comprised 293 participants, after removing 6 participants who failed all attention check questions or did not interact with the chatbot, as verified by chat logs. Of the final sample, 150 (34.01%) identified as Black/African Americans, and 143 (32.43%) as Hispanic/Latinos. The average participant age was 34.84 years (SD = 12.16). Regarding gender, 63.14% were female, 33.79% were male, and 3.07% identified as non-binary. Educationally, 17.40% had a high school diploma or less, 71.33% had some college education or a college degree, and 11.26% held a graduate degree or higher. The median household income bracket was between $25,000 and $49,999. Notably, a comparison between the final sample and the excluded participants revealed no significant differences in these demographic factors.

Chatbot Web Server and OpenAI's GPT-4 API

Based on Zhao et al. (2024), the chatbot was programmed using PHP and interfaces with GPT-4 through OpenAI's API. This allows for prompt-based and fine-tuned customization of multiple versions of chatbots for different experimental conditions at scale. These chatbots were deployed on our web-browser-based interface capable of supporting up to 100 concurrent users, logging chat histories and timestamps, and performing daily data backups.

Procedures and Manipulation

Participants were asked to imagine a hurricane forecast for the following week and to interact with a prototype GPT-4 chatbot to learn more about disaster preparedness. Through a system prompt, the chatbot was instructed to simulate an agent from a Florida emergency management team, providing credible and accurate disaster preparedness information from a governmental perspective.

Participants were then randomly assigned to different conditions. Based on the literature (Huang & Shen, 2016), a culturally tailored chatbot was promoted to adapt its information according to the participant's primary race/ethnicity, while a non-tailored chatbot provided generic information. Namely, a culturally tailored chatbot could incorporate a culturally familiar agent name, express concerns for the specific community, offer language options (Hispanic participants only), and provide culturally relevant information (e.g., recommending culturally appropriate items for an emergency kit). For example, a culturally tailored chatbot was prompted to "always address the interests and needs of the %race% community in Florida in providing preparation information, such as supplies, planning, and property protection." Although not the primary focus of this study, we manipulated the chatbot's tone to examine its effect in line with prior research (Men et al., 2022). Specifically, an informal chatbot was prompted to use a casual and personal tone with emojis, acronyms, and slang, whereas a formal chatbot used an official and professional tone, providing authoritative and well-structured information (Gretry et al., 2017).

On Qualtrics, participants were randomly assigned to either a culturally tailored chatbot, which matched the chatbot's racial/ethnic identity to their self-identified race/ethnicity, or a non tailored control chatbot, which was uniformly assigned as White/Caucasian. A custom URL facilitated this assignment, with an additional parameter for chatbot tone manipulation. Participants clicked on the URL, which directed them to interact with the assigned chatbot on our web server. They were asked to interact with the chatbot for at least five minutes. Participants did not report encountering misinformation in a pilot test[1]. A randomization check supported successful randomization, as participants showed no significant differences in age, gender, income, race/ethnicity, or education.

Measurement

Dialogic Communication. Yang et al.'s (2015) two-factor and 28-item scale was used to measure organization-public dialogic communication on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "Strongly Disagree" to 7 "Strongly Agree". A confirmatory factor analysis with robust maximum likelihood estimation confirmed the second-order factor structure: chi-squared value (314, $N = 293$) = 801.49, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.942, SRMR = 0.052, RMSEA = 0.065, 90% CI [0.057, 0.072], $p < .001$. Factor loadings were high (see Figure S1 for the full model).

For the second-order factor of mutuality (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$), the reliabilities of each subfactor were collaboration (3 items, e.g., "The organization accepts publics' opinions as worthy of consideration," $M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.13$, $\alpha = .87$), grounding (3 items, e.g., "The organization tries to establish that public correctly understood," $M = 5.37$, $SD = 1.08$, $\alpha = .86$), equality (3 items, "The organization doesn't seek control over publics," $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.28$, $\alpha = .75$), responsiveness (3 items, "The organization pays attention to what publics say," $M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.22$, $\alpha = .87$), respect (3 items, "The organization recognizes the unique value of publics' opinions," $M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.18$, $\alpha = .89$), and empathy (3 items, e.g., "The organization is empathetic in understanding publics' feelings," $M = 5.06$, $SD = 1.23$, $\alpha = .88$). For the second order factor of openness (α = .95), the reliabilities of each subfactor were accessibility (4 items,

[1] A pilot test (n = 40) showed that participants from various racial communities responded positively to the chatbot and did not report encountering misinformation. Minor prompt adjustments were made, such as prioritizing providing information over promising actions and initiating the interaction in English.

e.g., "The organization shares open access of information to all publics," *M* = 5.39, *SD* = 1.12, α = .81), genuineness (3 items, e.g., "The organization genuinely commits to the conversation with publics," *M* = 5.45, *SD* = 1.18, α = .90), and transparency (3 items, e.g., "The organization genuinely commits to the conversation with publics," *M* = 5.36, *SD* = 1.17, α = .88).

OPRs. Based on Hon and Grunig (1999), 18 items were used to measure four dimensions of OPRs in the government agency's hurricane preparation. Participants rated their (dis)agreement with several statements on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree," 7 = "Strongly Agree") across trust (6 items, e.g., "This agency treats my community fairly and justly," *M* = 4.90, *SD* = 1.28, α = .94), satisfaction (4 items, e.g., "My community is happy in their interaction with this government agency," *M* = 4.78, *SD* = 1.26, α = .93), commitment (4 items, e.g., "This government agency values this relationship with my community," *M* = 4.81, *SD* = 1.27, α = .92), and control mutuality (4 items, e.g., "This agency and my community are both attentive to what each other say," *M* = 4.92, *SD* = 1.13, α = .88).

Pre-existing Trust in Agency. Pre-existing trust was measured using six items adapted from Grimmelikhuijsen and Knies (2017) to assess participants' general trust toward public agencies involved in disaster and emergency management in their local area. Participants indicated their level of agreement with the following statements on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 "Strongly Disagree" to 7 "Strongly Agree". Example statements include "Overall, the organizations are capable of leading disaster management efforts," "The organizations are truthful in dealing with me," and "I believe these organizations would act in my best interest." The mean score for pre-existing trust was 5.01 (*SD* = 1.16, α = .94).

Covariates. Racial identification and chatbot tone were used as covariates. Three items from Leach et al. (2008) measured participants' identification with their racial or ethnic group. For instance, participants responded to the statement, "Being [Hispanic/Latino] is a significant part of my identity," using a 7-point Likert scale (*M* = 5.41, *SD* = 1.37, α = .86). The bracketed term reflected the participant's self-reported race or ethnicity. Chatbot tone is a binary variable coded as 1 for formal and 0 for informal.

Analytical Scheme

We conducted structural equation modeling through the R "Lavaan" package. In the structural model, exogenous variables were the manipulated cultural tailoring coded as a binary variable and covariates (not shown in the figure for simplicity). Mediators included perceived cultural tailoring, mutuality, and openness. Endogenous variables included four OPR outcomes (Figure 1). To test the moderation effect, we incorporated the standardized scores of perceived cultural tailoring, pre-trust in the agency, and their interaction term in the structural model (Hayes, 2017). The identification of latent constructs and error covariances in the measurement model is detailed in the note of Figure 2. The model was evaluated using standard cutoff values for the model-data fit indices (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Table 1 shows a correlation matrix of these variables.

Results

Manipulation Check

Participants indicated the relevance of the chatbot's information to their community's needs and interests on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 "Very Irrelevant" to 5 "Very Relevant".

Compared to those in the control condition (*M* = 3.39, *SD* = 1.18, *n* = 139), participants assigned to a culturally tailored chatbot perceived the information as more relevant to their racial community (*M* = 3.73, *SD* = 0.98, *n* = 154). The difference was statistically significant: $t(269) = -2.71$, $p = .007$, Cohen's $d = 0.32$, supporting a small effect size.

Hypotheses

The model-data fit was satisfactory (Figure 2): Chi-squared value (118, $N = 293$) = 230.44, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.97, SRMR = 0.041, RMSEA = 0.057, 90% CI [0.046, 0.068], $p = .141$. H1 predicted that manipulated cultural tailoring increased perceived cultural tailoring, which in turn increased organization-public dialogic communication, including mutuality (a) and openness (b). Our results showed that manipulated cultural tailoring positively predicted perceived cultural tailoring ($b = 0.30$, $SE = 0.11$, $p = .008$), which positively predicted the mutuality ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .009$) and openness ($b = 0.13$, $SE = 0.06$, $p = .041$), supporting H1 and H1b.

H2 predicted that pre-trust in the agency moderated the relationship between perceived cultural tailoring and mutuality, such that among those with lower trust, the relationship between cultural tailoring and mutuality was weaker. Our result showed a significant interaction effect: $b = -0.07$, $SE = 0.35$, $p = .044$. Pre-trust scores were median split into low and high groups (Figure 3). A simple slopes analysis showed that cultural tailoring was positively associated with mutuality at lower levels of pre-trust ($b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .04$), indicating that perceived cultural tailoring significantly increased mutuality when pre-trust was low. However, at higher levels of pre-trust, perceived cultural tailoring did not affect mutuality, as mutuality scores were already high in this group. Additionally, both perceived cultural tailoring ($b = 0.14$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .009$) and pre-trust in the agency ($b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$) were positively associated with perceived mutuality. H2 was supported. However, H3 assuming the interaction between perceived cultural tailoring and openness was not supported.

H4 predicted that mutuality (a) and openness (b) increased OPR outcomes, including trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality. Our results indicated that mutuality positively related to commitment ($b = 0.61$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$), control mutuality ($b = 0.54$, $SE = 0.08$, $p < .001$), trust ($b = 0.68$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$), and satisfaction ($b = 0.73$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$). Similarly, openness positively related to commitment ($b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = .026$), trust ($b = 0.26$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .001$), satisfaction ($b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .007$), but not control mutuality. As such, H4 was fully supported, whereas H4b was partially supported.

Discussion

The results of the study provide meaningful insights into the role of cultural tailoring in fostering effective organization-public relationships (OPRs) via dialogic communication. The main findings can be summarized as follows. First, the analysis suggests cultural tailoring positively influenced perceived cultural tailoring, which subsequently improved both mutuality and openness in dialogic communication. These findings support the idea that cultural tailoring is a critical antecedent for two-way, symmetrical engagement between organizations and multicultural publics, emphasizing the significance of culturally tailored messaging, mediated through personalized AI tools, in addressing community-specific information needs during disasters.

The moderating effect of pre-existing trust provides more nuanced findings. The significant interaction between perceived cultural tailoring and pre-trust indicates that cultural tailoring is particularly impactful for individuals with low trust in public agencies. For these individuals, tailored communication bridges the gap, fostering mutuality even in the absence of strong pre-existing trust. This highlights the potential of cultural tailoring as a strategic tool for rebuilding trust in communities with historical mistrust or systemic neglect. Conversely, the diminished impact of tailoring at high levels of pre-trust suggests diminishing returns for well trusted agencies, underscoring the need for targeted trust-building efforts in communities where skepticism towards public institutions persists. These findings, collectively, reveal the need for a differential approach in tailoring communication strategies, depending on the trust baseline of the target audience.

Regarding the relationship between dialogic communication and OPR outcomes, findings suggest that mutuality strongly predicts all four OPR outcomes—trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality—whereas openness has a weaker but significant effect on most outcomes. These findings underscore the importance of mutuality, suggesting that two-way, empathetic communication is foundational for building trust and commitment. The strong influence of mutuality resonates with dialogic communication theories, which emphasize reciprocity and shared understanding as essential elements of effective engagement (Yang et al., 2015). Organizations aiming to strengthen their relationships with the public should therefore prioritize fostering mutuality by actively listening to community concerns and demonstrating responsiveness.

It is worth mentioning that the less consistent impact of openness, particularly on control mutuality, might reflect limitations in accessibility or transparency practices that warrant further exploration. While openness remains an important component of dialogic communication, its partial effects suggest that transparency alone may not suffice to enhance perceptions of shared control. Factors such as the depth of information disclosed, the timing of communication, and the channels used may moderate the influence of openness. Future research could investigate whether the effects of openness vary across contexts or depend on the depth of transparency provided by organizations. Additionally, examining the interplay between openness and other dialogic principles, such as mutuality and empathy, could offer a more nuanced understanding of how these factors collectively shape OPR outcomes.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

By demonstrating the pivotal role of cultural tailoring in enhancing mutuality and openness, the research extends dialogic communication theories to encompass the specific needs of multicultural audiences. It highlights cultural tailoring as an essential antecedent for achieving two-way, symmetrical communication, testing an integrated theoretical model that views dialogic communication as a critical pathway translating cultural tailoring strategies into improved OPR outcomes. Furthermore, the nuanced insights into pre-existing trust as a

moderator add depth to our understanding of how tailored communication can bridge trust gaps, reinforcing the importance of trust-building measures in dialogic theory (Bruning et al., 2008). The findings also enrich cultural tailoring theory by emphasizing the need for differential strategies that consider varying levels of audience trust, suggesting a context-specific approach that extends beyond demographic differences.

Our findings also generate key practical implications for government and emergency management agencies. First, agencies can benefit from leveraging culturally tailored AI chatbots to foster engagement, particularly among communities with historically low trust in public institutions. Doing so will not only enhance the perceived relevance of agencies' communication efforts, but also strengthen mutuality between the agency and the community. Second, mutuality should remain a central focus of disaster communication strategies. Agencies may benefit from investing in systems and practices that enable genuine, two-way dialogue with affected communities. This approach ensures that communication is not only informative but also empathetic and responsive to community needs, thereby strengthening organization-public relationships. Lastly, agencies should carefully evaluate the dimensions of transparency and accessibility that resonate most with their target audiences. Given the mixed results regarding openness in this study, it is crucial to identify different aspects of transparency that various cultural communities value.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study focuses primarily on Black and Hispanic residents of Florida, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other multiethnic or multicultural communities with different sociocultural dynamics and historical contexts. Future research should explore the efficacy of culturally tailored AI tools in diverse regions and among other ethnic groups, such as Asian American communities that are also rapidly growing. Second, while our study develops a prototype to implement cultural tailoring via GenAI, more robust testing of this prototype may be required. Specifically, the depth and dimensions of such cultural tailoring (e.g., linguistic nuances, intersectional identities, or varying levels of acculturation) needs to be more systematically explored. Last but not least, the study acknowledges that trust in public institutions varies across communities, but it does not fully explore strategies for building baseline trust before deploying culturally tailored AI tools. Future research should investigate how to establish initial trust with low-trust populations to enhance the effectiveness of these tools.

Conclusion

The study highlights the potential of using culturally tailored GenAI chatbots to strengthen OPRs and enhance community's disaster readiness, particularly for vulnerable populations. By fostering mutuality and leveraging pre-existing trust dynamics, AI technologies can contribute to more inclusive and empathetic communication strategies, offering a novel and scalable model to engage the diverse publics during disaster preparedness.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix of Key Constructs

	Manip CT	Perceived CT	Pre-trust	Mutuality	Openness	Commitment	CM	Trust	Satisfaction
Manip CT	1.00	.16**	.02	.02	.01	.01	-.05	-.07	.01
Perceived CT	.16**	1.00	.09	.14*	.12*	.16**	.18**	.12*	.18**
Pre-trust	-0.02	0.09	1.00	.52***	.48***	.56***	.57***	.67***	.64***
Mutuality	.02	.14*	.52***	1.00	.82***	.72***	.68***	.71***	.74***
Openness	.01	.12*	.48***	.82***	1.00	.64***	.58***	.64***	.67***
Commitment	.01	.16**	.56***	.72****	.64***	1.00	.73***	.79***	.85***
Control Mutuality (CM)	-0.05	.18**	.57***	.68****	.58***	.73***	1.00	.84***	.76***
Trust	-.07	.12*	.67***	.71***	.64***	.79***	.84***	1.00	.83***
Satisfaction	.01	.18**	.64***	.74***	.67***	.85***	.76***	.83***	1.00

Note. $N = 293$. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Figure 1

Proposed Theoretical Model

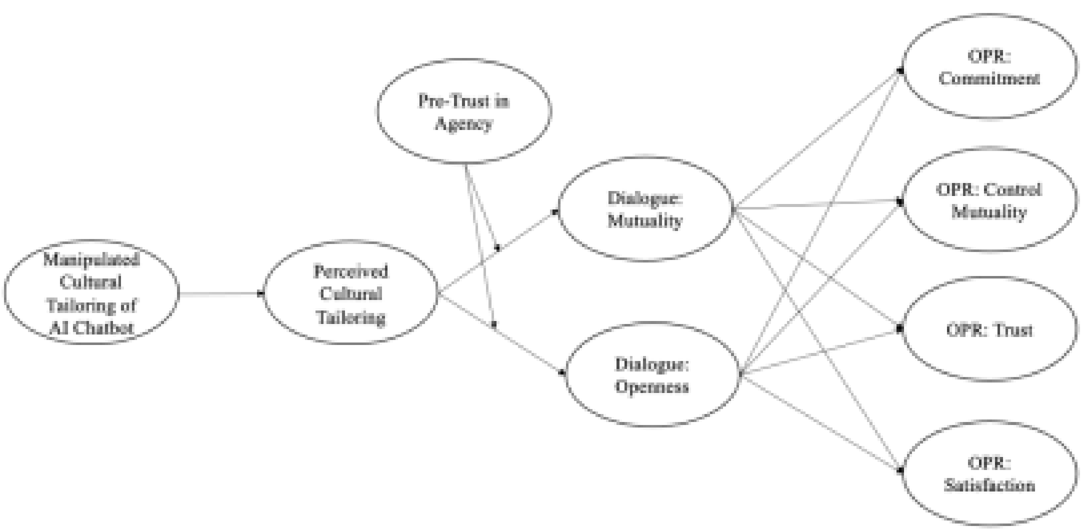
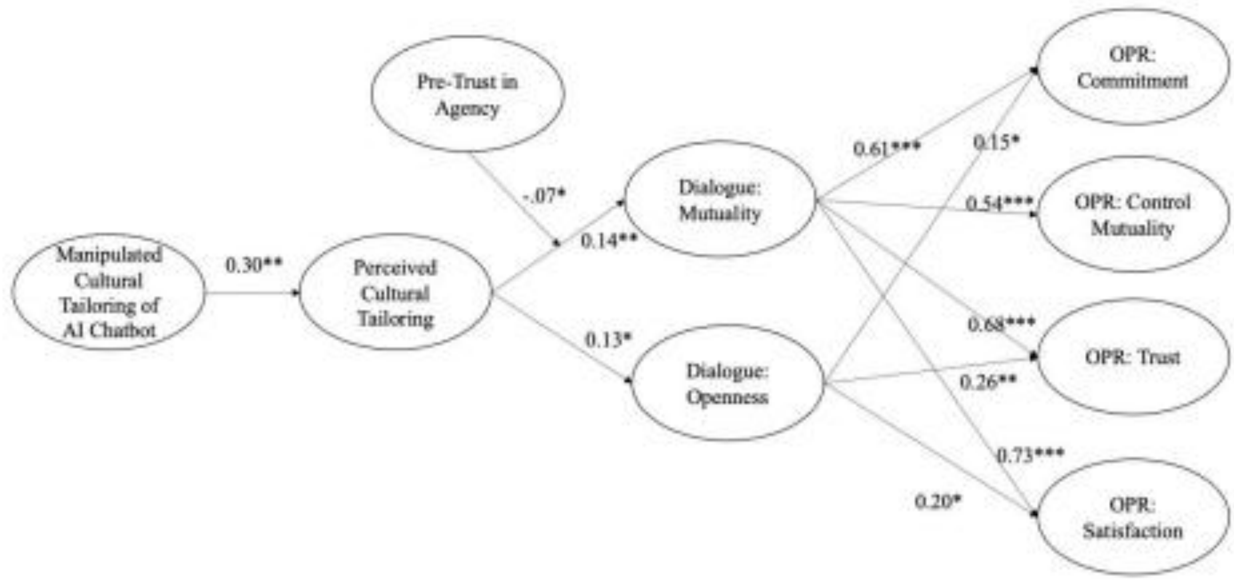


Figure 2

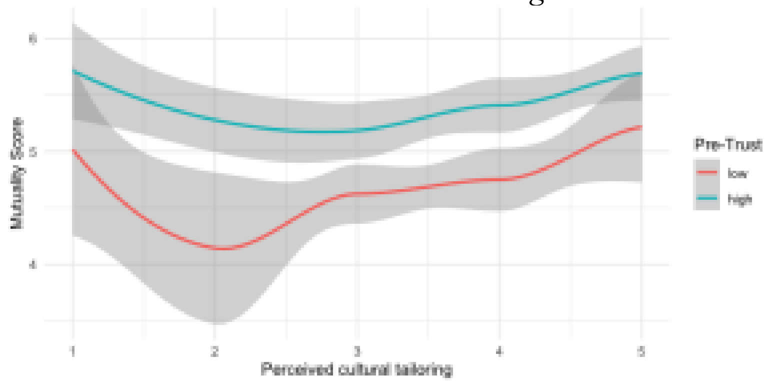
Structural Equation Modeling Results with Unstandardized Coefficients and Significant Hypothesized Paths



Note. $N = 293$. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$. Covariates include chatbot tone and racial identification. Maximum likelihood estimation was used. All factors of OPR outcomes were identified by three composite items created by the parceling approach. For example, satisfaction was identified by the first two items as separate indicators, while the average of the last two items formed the third composite indicator. To ensure sufficient power in SEM, mutuality and openness were each represented by a single composite indicator, calculated as the average of their respective first-order factor scores computed from the confirmatory factor analysis. For example, openness was measured by a composite indicator derived from the average factor scores of accessibility, genuineness, and transparency. The error of mutuality and openness was allowed to covary.

Figure 3

Interaction Between Perceived Cultural Tailoring and Pre-Trust in the Agency

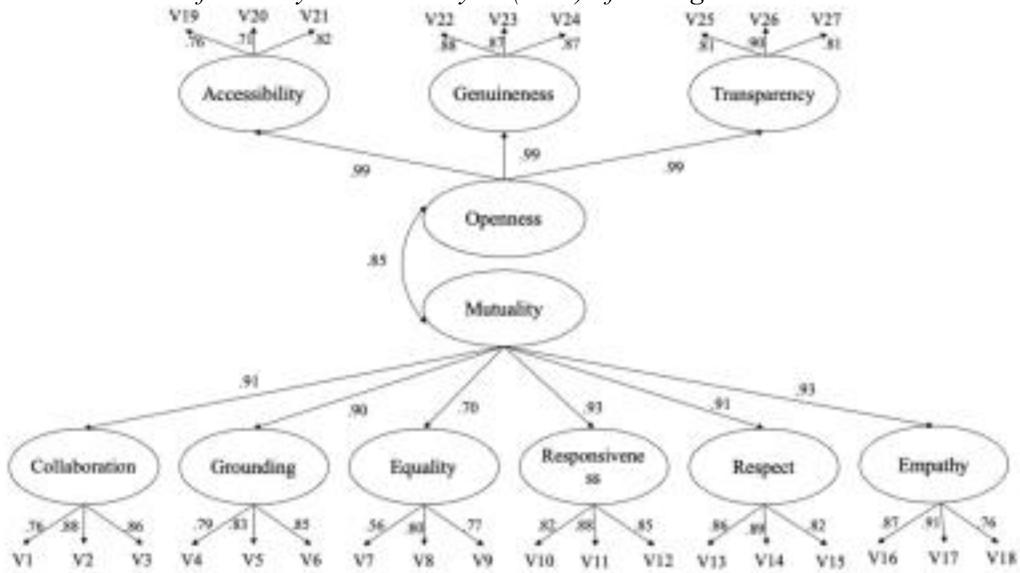


Note. For visualization, pre-trust scores were median split into low and high groups. Smooth curves using the LOESS method are fitted for each groups

Supplementary Material

Figure S1

Second-order Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of Dialogic Communication



Note. All loadings are standardized. The model-data fit is relatively good: chi-squared value (314, N = 293) = 801.49, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.942, SRMR = 0.052, RMSEA = 0.065, 90% CI [0.057, 0.072], $p < .001$. All three measurement items for each first-level factor were included in the model, except for accessibility, which had four items. Following the parceling approach, the third and fourth items were averaged to form a composite indicator (V21) as shown in the figure.

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The Value of Internal Social Media Communication Strategies and Employees' In-Role and Extra-Role Social Media Engagement

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Abstract

This study examines how internal social media communication strategies influence employees' in-role and extra-role social media engagement. Based on social identity theory and conservation of resources theory, we investigated the effects of two types of internal social media communication strategies—organization-oriented and employee-oriented—on employees' social media engagement. A survey of 429 U.S. employees showed that organization-oriented strategies enhanced employees' organizational identification, which further motivates employees' in-role and extra-role social media behaviors. Employee oriented strategies also fostered employees' social media engagement by strengthening their organizational identification and evoking positive emotions when using social media. These findings provide significant theoretical and practical implications for strategic internal communication and social media strategies.

Keywords. internal social media communication, social media engagement, employee behaviors, social identity theory, conservation of resources theory

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The Value of Internal Social Media Communication Strategies and Employees' In-Role and Extra-Role Social Media Engagement

In the social media environment, employees play a vital role as internal stakeholders and brand ambassadors for their organizations, with their shared content boosting social media reach by over 500%, compared to 3% reach for brand accounts without paid advertising support (Terpening et al., 2016). Additionally, research indicates that consumers tend to trust content shared by employees more than information disseminated through the official brand social media accounts as messages generated from employees resonate more with the public than those from executives (StartBlox, 2017). As employees' words on social media are considered credible sources of organizational information, their participation in social media (e.g., employee advocacy) has been shown to enhance brand credibility, awareness, consumer engagement, and corporate performance (Frederiksen, 2017; Latvala, 2017). Therefore, an increasing number of organizations have begun to implement internal social media initiatives (e.g., employee advocacy programs, social media influencer programs) to better utilize employees as their brand power on social media by encouraging their pro-organizational behaviors (Brito, 2018; Venciute et al., 2023).

To leverage the power of employees through social media platforms, public relations studies have highlighted the importance of strategic internal communication. Effective internal communication strategies not only strengthen employees' sense of identity and belonging but also equip them with the resources and motivation necessary for ethical and impactful social media communication (Lee & Kim, 2021). Most existing studies have focused on how employees' overall communication experiences at work affect their motivations to engage with social media as organizational representatives (e.g., Jiang & Luo, 2020; Men et al., 2020). However, few studies have developed and empirically tested social media-specific communication strategies tailored for internal stakeholders. For example, organizations may actively use social media channels to share and update company-related information, issues, and events, targeting both internal and external audiences (i.e., organization-oriented). Organizations may also utilize social media to acknowledge employees' contributions and achievements, feature their stories, and share behind-the-scenes (i.e., employee-oriented). Although these strategies have been commonly used in many corporate social media accounts, their impact on internal outcomes remained underexplored in academic research.

To fill this gap, therefore, this study aims to examine how organizations' internal social media communication strategies influence employees' social media engagement. Previous studies of social media engagement among employees in public relations scholarship have largely focused on its impacts on external audiences (e.g. Jin et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2021) and employees' use of internal social media channels (e.g., Ewing et al., 2019; Men et al., 2020). Based on previous literature on social media, employee behaviors, and internal communication, we expand the notion of employees' social media engagement and differentiate their in-role and extra-role behaviors. In general, employees' in-role behaviors include activities directly related to job responsibilities, while extra-role behaviors are discretionary behaviors that go beyond formal job requirements such as organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB) (Vey & Campbell, 2004). In social media settings, employees may follow their company's guidelines and fulfill their responsibilities as brand ambassadors by engaging in in-role behaviors (e.g., like, share, comment). At the same time, employees may proactively contribute to their employer's social media activities by engaging in extra role behaviors such as voicing.

To understand how organizations' social media-specific internal communication strategies influence employees' diverse forms of social media engagement (i.e., in-role and extra-role), this study integrates social identity theory and conservation of resources (COR) theory. Social identity theory helps us to explain how employees develop a strong sense of belonging by internalizing their organizational identity, thereby motivated to engage in pro organizational behaviors (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Meanwhile, COR theory highlights the pivotal role of positive emotions as psychological resources employees can utilize to mitigate the stress caused by resource depletion at work (Hobfoll, 1989). By integrating these two theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to uncover how internal social media communication strategies influence employees' in-role and extra-role behaviors on social media through the enhancement of their organizational identity and positive emotions.

Literature Review

Employees' Social Media Engagement

Employee social media engagement has emerged as a significant area of study in public relations and internal communication research due to its potential to enhance corporate reputation and stakeholder relationships (Smith et al., 2017). In general, employee social media engagement refers to employees' active participation, interaction, and engagement with organizational content on social media platforms. These behaviors include sharing, liking, commenting, and creating content consistent with organizational culture, goals, and strategic objectives (Haddud et al., 2016; van Zoonen & Banghart, 2018). Such actions demonstrate employees' engagement with and attention to the organization's published content (Che et al., 2022). Recent studies have expanded this definition by including employees' voluntary actions such as advocacy (e.g., positive information sharing, defending their employer) as part of their social media engagement (Thomas, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2021). These extra-role behaviors reflect employees' proactive efforts to reciprocate the support and recognition they receive from their organization. Such active engagement not only enhances the organization's visibility, interactivity, credibility, and public trust, while fostering stronger employee organization relationships and enhance employees' job satisfaction and loyalty (Latvala, 2017).

Extending the idea that employees' social media engagement is a discretionary behavior, we consider it a part of their OCBs. Employees are valuable internal assets who contribute to promoting their company's social media strategies when they provide insights and feedback based on their knowledge of the organization (Ewing et al., 2019). This type of behavior refers to employee voice, defined as employees' behaviors of providing suggestions, feedback, or constructive criticism about organizational policies and processes (Morrison, 2014). As a form of OCBs, employee voice is voluntary, pro-organizational behaviors that extend beyond formal job responsibilities (Vigoda-Gadot, 2006). This behavior can be related to their company's social media activities. Motivated employees may not hesitate to speak up and express their opinions and provide suggestions to improve their organizations' social media communication strategies. This extra-role behavior could be potentially influenced by organizations' communication strategies. By examining employees' dual role as external advocates for the organization and as active internal contributors, we aim to highlight the strategic importance of employee behaviors in enhancing both the organization's external reputation and internal processes.

Public relations scholars have studied how to promote social media engagement of employees effectively and ethically through strategic internal communication (e.g., Huang et al., 2013). For example, supportive internal communication strengthens organizational commitment, encouraging employees to actively share and defend organizational narratives on digital platforms (Walden & Kingsley Westerman, 2018). Scholars have also suggested that interactive CSR communication strategies that emphasize dialogue, transparency, and participation can positively influence employees' perceptions of organizational values and enhance their social media advocacy (Jiang & Luo, 2020). While numerous studies explored the organizational- and individual-level drivers of employees' social media engagement, few have examined social media-specific internal communication strategies.

Social Media Communication Strategies

Organizations' communication strategies on social media have long been a major topic in public relations scholarship (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Plowman & Wilson, 2018). Studies widely recognize social media platforms as tools for fostering interaction and relationship-building with external stakeholders. In employee communication setting, many research have identified key drivers and motivations of employees' social media behaviors, such as the quality of employee-organization relationships (Wang et al., 2022), perceived external prestige and reputation (Lee, 2020), organizational online distinctiveness and employee pride (Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020), and employees' personal network connections (Fusi & Zhang, 2020). Organizations' role has also been highlighted. Providing appropriate incentives and guidelines for using social media (Soens & Claeys, 2021), training (Thomas, 2020), and effective governance (Macnamara & Zerfasss, 2012) are considered critical in leveraging social media's potential for internal relationship management. Another line of research highlighted the benefits of social media usage for employees. For example, Cao et al. (2016) emphasized that trust built through social media fosters knowledge sharing among employees. Several scholars noted that social media can be an effective channel for employee voice (Hollands et al., 2016; Ghani & Malik, 2023) and it can strengthen leader member and team-member communication (Chen & Wei, 2020). Moreover, social media helps to create informed and collaborative workplace environments, thereby increasing employee engagement (Chansukree et al., 2022).

Notably, previous studies have suggested that organizations can encourage employees' social media behaviors by enhancing their positive experiences at work through internal communication practices. For example, two-way symmetrical communication, characterized by listening, feedback, and mutual understating, enhances employees' relationship with their company and fosters their social media advocacy (Lee & Kim, 2021).

Organizations' communication strategies for social media, however, could also be social media-specific. For example, organizations may actively use social media to share and update company-related information, issues, and events, targeting both internal and external publics (i.e., organization-oriented). Such strategies emphasize the organization's mission, vision, and achievements, helping employees to keep updated and fostering a sense of pride and identity among employees, encouraging their participation in core job-related tasks (Pereira et al., 2021). Organizations may also utilize social media targeting internal audiences, to acknowledge employees' contributions and achievements, feature their stories, and share behind-the-scenes (i.e., employee-oriented). This strategy focuses on recognizing and showing gratitude for employees' contributions and sharing success stories to establish emotional connections, thereby motivating them to engage in extra-role activities and extend organizational advocacy (Tsarenko et al., 2018). Although these strategies and tactics have been practiced in many organizations, few research has conceptualized and tested its impacts on employee responses. Therefore, this study conceptualizes two types of internal social media communication strategies—*organization-oriented* and *employee-oriented*—and aims to test how they can boost employees' in-role (i.e., liking, sharing, commenting) and extra role (i.e., voice) social media engagement.

The Mediating Role of Organizational Identification

To better understand how organizations' internal social media communication strategies cultivate employees' social media engagement, we first draw upon social identity theory. Defined as "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization(s) in which he or she is a member" (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104), organizational identification has been a critical motivator for employees' behaviors in the workplace and an outcome of strategic internal communication practices (Milanović & Radosavljevic-Njegic, 2019; Yue et al., 2020). The modern concept of organizational identification is rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which provides a foundational framework suggesting that individuals derive their self-concept from their association with a social group, such as an organization. In this context, organizational identification represents a specific form of social identity, where individuals define themselves based on their connection to the organization (Ashforth et al., 2008; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

This cognitive and emotional connection not only shapes employees' work attitudes (Ashforth et al., 2008), but also has a profound impact on positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction, commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Lee et al., 2015; Lu et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021). Public relations scholars have argued that effective internal communication plays a vital role in fostering employees' sense of belonging, which is a fundamental driver of organizational identification (Sun et al., 2023). Specifically, identification can be cultivated through consistent, transparent, and engaging communication strategies that align organizational goals with employee values (Yue et al., 2020).

In this study, we propose that organizations' internal social media communication strategies play a crucial role in fostering employees' organizational identification. Organizations' use of social media communication to promote their values, mission, and achievements on social media platforms (i.e., organization-oriented) serves to provide timely, relevant, important information to their employees. Such transparent communication has been found to increase employees' organizational identification (Li et al., 2020). Organization oriented social media communication also aims to enhance employees' understanding and a cohesive team environment by disseminating organizational values. Such efforts strengthen internal alignment and cultivate employees' sense of collective belonging (Zhao et al., 2009). Consequently, organization-oriented communication bolsters a shared sense of progress and mission alignment between employees and the organization. This deepens employees' cognitive and emotional connection with the organization, organizational identification. Similarly, employee-oriented social media communication strategies may also enhance employees' identification with their organization. This strategy focuses on recognizing employees' contributions, showing gratitude, and acknowledging their achievements on social media, aiming to cultivate a sense of personal significance within the organization (Jhamb et al., 2022). Showcasing employees' personal experiences and demonstrating genuine care for their well-being are effective approaches to strengthening trust and reciprocity mechanisms between employees and the organization (Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008). Such communication approaches foster a workplace atmosphere where employees feel valued and respected while encouraging the alignment of their personal and organizational goals (Jaakkola et al., 2024). In doing so, these strategies further enhance employees' identification with and integration into organizational values. Therefore, we hypothesize that both organization-oriented and employee-oriented social media communication strategies can strengthen the connection between employees and the organization by fostering alignment and unification between employees' personal values and organizational identity.

H1. Organizations' (a) organization-oriented and (b) employee-oriented social media communication strategies are positively associated with employees' organizational identification.

Organizational identification, in turn, serves as a critical motivator of employees' social media engagement. In prior literature, organizational identification has been identified as a strong predictor of diverse types of employees' pro-organizational behaviors (Blader et al., 2017; Riketta, 2005). Social identity theory (Tajfel& Turner, 1979) suggests that when employees identify with their organization, they are more likely to align their behaviors with organizational values and goals. This alignment is reflected in in-role behaviors (e.g., fulfilling job responsibilities) and extra-role behaviors (e.g., exceeding formal job responsibilities) (Van Loon & Vandenabeele, 2017). Extra-role behaviors (e.g., OCBs) are often highlighted as direct outcomes of strong organizational identification. High levels of identification encourage employees to support their organization by manifesting pro organizational behaviors such as advocacy because they associate a significant portion of their self-concept and self-esteem with the organization's achievements (Yue, 2021).

Extending this idea, we also anticipate that employees with strong organizational identification will prioritize their organization's interests and voluntarily engage in social media behaviors to benefit the group they identify with. That is, employees who strongly identify with their organization are more likely to actively respond to organizations' social media communication by liking, sharing, and creating content (i.e., in-role), and proactively offering suggestions and ideas that benefit their company's social media presence (i.e., extra role). Previous studies suggest that employees' social media behaviors are often driven by a deep sense of organizational identification, highlighting employees' intrinsic commitment to the organization and motivation to contribute to the organization's reputation and success (van Prooijen et al., 2024; van Zoonen & Treem,2019). Thus, we hypothesize that

H2. Employees' organizational identification is positively associated with their (a) in-role and (b) extra-role social media engagement.

The Mediating Role of Positive Emotion

Aside from organizational identification, we suggest another key mediator, positive emotions. In general, positive emotions indicate a unique, instant response to something meaningful to individuals, a temporary pleasure (Fredrickson, 2001). These emotions include specific expressions such as joy, pride, hope, and gratitude, and they serve as vital psychological and emotional resources that help individuals navigate challenges and contribute positively across various situations (Lazarus, 1991). In organizational settings, research has demonstrated that positive emotions significantly enhance employees' cognitive and behavioral flexibility in the workplace, relieve stress, and enhance teamwork and innovation (Diener et al., 2020). According to the conservation of resources (COR) theory, positive emotions act as a crucial supportive force, helping employees reserve psychological resources, such as energy, time, and mental health, alleviating the burden of resource depletion and improving work efficiency (Hobfoll, 1989; Nguyen et al., 2022). In addition, positive emotions can reduce employee burnout and improve job satisfaction by strengthening psychological capital and resilience (Gong et al., 2018).

In the current study, we focus on employees' positive emotions when interacting with their organization in the social media environment and expect that strategic communication can play a vital role in stimulating positive emotions when they use social media for organizational purposes. Specifically, organization-oriented communication strategies help organizations to deliver company-related events, news, and information to employees through highly interactive communication methods. Such transparent information sharing can effectively reduce employees' concerns about uncertainty within the organization and build trust, thereby further stimulating employees' positive emotions (Lee & Kim, 2021). For example, sharing collective achievements and showcasing the corporate vision through social media enhance employees' positive emotions such as pride. This transparent and interactive form of communication can also enhance employees' belonging within the organization by promoting emotional resonance (Sun et al., 2023).

Furthermore, employee-oriented communication strategies evoke feelings of gratitude by recognizing employees' contributions and sharing personal stories (Nguyen et al., 2022). Previous studies have found that organizations' strategic and employee-centered internal communication that values employees' opinions and highlights mutual benefits can trigger employees' positive emotions at work (Men & Yue, 2019; Yue et al., 2021) Similarly, when companies use social media to showcase key achievements or highlight employees' important roles in projects, it may encourage employees positive feelings about using social media when interacting with their employers and encourage them to enjoy sharing and receiving information about their organization on social media. Thus, we hypothesize that

> H3. Organizations' (a) organization-oriented and (b) employee-oriented social media communication strategies are positively associated with employees' positive emotions of using social media.

Positive emotions are critical psychological resources that motivate employees to actively participate in social media interactions. According to COR theory, positive emotions such as joy and pride help replenish employees' psychological energy, driving them to engage in mutually beneficial activities (Hobfoll, 1989). These emotions not only enhance employees' adaptability but also inspire them to advocate for the organization or actively disseminate organizational information, strengthening the organization's online reputation, and deepen the emotional connection between employees and the organization (Fredrickson et al., 2003). Employees' emotional motivation was also found to improve employees' psychological engagement (Fusi & Zhang, 2020).

Adding on this line of research, we expect that employees' positive emotions are key drivers for their social media engagement. Prior studies have suggested that employees' social media behaviors are often driven by employees' inner pride and satisfaction, which encourages them to align personal social media use with organizational goals (Nguyen et al., 2022). Extra-role behaviors that extend beyond job responsibilities primarily stem from gratitude and enthusiasm, as well as strong identification with the organization (Fusi & Zhang, 2020). Pride fosters a sense of ownership among employees, motivating them to share organizational achievements (Barsade & Knight, 2015). Similarly, gratitude enhances reciprocal relationships between employees and the organization, encouraging employees to contribute beyond their job responsibilities (Men et al., 2020; Yue et al., 2020). Positive emotions when using social media, therefore, are expected to promote employees' motivation to engage in in- and extra-role behaviors on social media, Thus, we hypothesize that

> H4. Employees' positive emotions of using social media are positively associated

with their (a) in-role and (b) extra-role social media engagement.

Method

Participants

To test the hypotheses, we used a quantitative online survey. Participants in this study included employees in the United States who actively use social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok and whose companies maintained at least one public social media channel. At the beginning of the survey, we asked participants whether their company had any type of social media-related activities or programs for employees, and those who said "yes" to this question were only allowed to answer the questions. Participants were recruited through an online survey conducted by Dynata, a U.S. based research panel company. To ensure the representativeness of the sample in terms of age, gender, and race/ethnicity, stratified random sampling with quotas was employed. Each participant who completed the 15-minute survey received a compensation of approximately $5.

The final valid sample consisted of 429 employees, of whom 52.2% were male (n = 224) and 47.3% were female (n = 203). The participants had an average age of 29 years (SD = 8.85). Regarding political orientation, 34.7% of them identified themselves as liberal, and 31% of them identified themselves as conservative. In terms of education level, 66.8% of the participants held at least a bachelor's degree. A majority of them (69.5%) were White, followed by 13.1% of Black or African American, 5.6% of Asian/Asian American, and 1% of others. Regarding income level, approximately 45.2% of participants reported an annual salary exceeding $100,000. Participants' organizational tenure varied, with 28.9% having more than 10 years of experience, 24.7% having 4–6 years, and 22.6% having 1–3 years. Position-wise, management roles (e.g., supervisors and team leaders) accounted for 38.5%, while experienced non-management roles represented 24.9%. Participants came from diverse industries, with the most common sectors being information and telecommunications (IT) (12.1%), followed by healthcare and social assistance (11.7%), construction (10.7%), and manufacturing (10.5%). In terms of organizational social media usage, Facebook was the most utilized platform (83.4%), followed by Instagram (66.9%) and Twitter (54.5%). Other frequently used platforms included YouTube (47.8%), LinkedIn (44.5%), and TikTok (43.4%).

Measures

First, we created items for two types of social media communication strategies based on previous literature: organization-oriented (five items, α = .898) and employee-oriented (six items, a = .925), using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (=1) to strongly agree (=5). These items were reviewed by public relations scholars for content validity and its reliability and validity were also tested and confirmed via exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Sample items for organization-oriented social media communication include "My company actively promotes its products and services on social media," "My company regularly shares company-related information and events on social media." For employee-oriented social media communication, items such as "My company acknowledges employees' contributions in a timely manner on social media," "My company features employees' accomplishments and/or stories to acknowledge it," were used.

Next, measures for employees' organizational identification were adopted from Mael and Ashforth (1992), comprising six items (α = .841) (e.g., When someone praises this company, it feels like a personal compliment.). Employees' positive emotions for using social media were evaluated using 11 items (α = .960), adapted from Sun et al. (2023) (e.g., I feel happy/pleased/grateful/proud when I communicate with my company on social media). A 5-

point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (=1) to strongly agree (=5) was used for these measures.

Finally, a total of 20 items were used for employees' social media engagement. Employees' in-role social media engagement was measured with 12 items ($\alpha = .963$), adapted from previous literature (e.g., Lee et al., 2021). Items began with "how frequently do you," and ended with each item. A 5-point Likert scale from never (=1) to always (=5) was used. Sample items include, "like/share/make comments on any posts related to your company on social media?" "share or upload postings about your company's recent news/achievements/product and/or service-related information on social media". Employees' extra-role social media engagement was measured with eight items ($\alpha = .938$) adapted from previous literature on employee voice (Morrison, 2014) (e.g., I develop and make recommendations concerning social media usage that affects my company.) **Data Analysis**

To evaluate the proposed model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using Mplus software. The analysis began with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the measurement model, followed by an assessment of the structural model. Model fit was evaluated based on the criteria outlined by Hu and Bentler (1999), which recommend acceptable fit indices as "CFI ≥ 0.95 and SRMR ≤ 0.10" or "RMSEA ≤ 0.06 and SRMR ≤ 0.10".

Results

Testing Measurement and Structural Models

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables. CFA results showed that the measurement model showed acceptable model fit: $\chi^2(1065) = 2026.948$; RMSEA = .050 [.047, .053]; CFI = .955; TLI = .951; SRMR = .039. All the factor loading values were greater than 0.5 at the $p < .001$ level. The average of variance extracted (AVE) values for all variables were higher than .5 and the composite reliabilities (CR) were all higher than .6, thereby providing supporting evidence for convergent and discriminant validity. The structural model also showed a good model fit: $\chi^2(1069) = 2072.979$; RMSEA = .051 [.048, .054]; CFI = .952; TLI = .949; SRMR = .049. Therefore, we interpreted the path coefficients (see Figure 1).

Hypotheses Testing

H1 hypothesized that organizations' two types of social media communication strategies are positively associated with employees' organizational identification. Results showed that both organization-oriented (.195, $p = .002$) and employee-oriented (.360, $p < .001$) social media communication strategies were positively related to organizational identification. H1a and H1b are thus supported. H2 investigated how employees' organizational identification is related to their social media engagement. Organizational identification was positively and significantly associated with both in-role (.128. $p = .008$) and extra-role (.280, $p < .001$) social media engagement of employees. H2a and H2b are thus all supported. In H3, we examined how two types of social media communication strategies in organizations are associated with another mediator, employees' positive emotions about using social media. While employee-oriented social media communication was positively and significantly associated with employees' positive emotions (.573, $p < .001$), organization oriented social media communication did not have a significant effect (.017, $p = .834$). Thus, H3a is not supported, while H3b is supported. H4 tested the relationship between employee's positive emotions about using social media and their social media engagement. Results revealed that employees' positive emotion were positively and significantly associated with both in-role (.760, $p <.001$) and extra-role (.614, $p < .001$) behaviors. Both H4a and H4b are thus all supported.

Discussion

Our key findings can be summarized as follows. Organization-oriented social media communication strategies significantly enhanced employees' social media in-role and extra role behaviors by fostering employees' organizational identification (i.e., a sense of belonging to their organization). Employee-oriented social media communication strategies, on the other hand, increased both employees' organizational identification and positive emotions about using social media, which in turn, enhanced their in-role and extra-role behaviors on social media. This study provides important theoretical and practical implications for public relations and employee communication scholarship.

Theoretical Implications

First, as one of the first empirical studies that conceptualizes and operationalizes organizations' employee-specific social media communication strategies, our study highlights the importance of a strategic approach to internal social media communication. Prior studies on employee communication for social media have largely focused on communication strategies for internal social media channels or the effects of employees' words on social media channels (e.g., Ewing et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2021). As social media becomes a critical tool for leveraging employees' roles as brand influencers, this study advances the theoretical development of internal social media communication by conceptualizing it in a holistic manner and distinguishing organization-oriented and employee-oriented strategies. Specifically, by revealing the distinct effects of organization-oriented and employee-oriented social media communication on employees' behaviors related to social media usage, our study fills the research gap on strategic social media in the employee communication context.

Second, this study explicates the mechanisms of how organizations' internal social media communication strategies can motivate employees' in-role and extra-role social media engagement. In exploring the potential mediating effect of organizational identification, our results showed that organizations' internal social media communication, both organization oriented and employee-oriented strategies, plays a critical role in enhancing employees' sense of belonging as valued members of an organization. This identification, in turn, motivated employees to engage in social media as advocates and brand ambassadors of their organization by actively responding to and communicating with company-related content on social media. Moreover, this identification helps employees to make voices to improve their organizations' social media communication strategies. The mediating role of positive emotion was notable as well. We found that employee-oriented social media communication strategy has a stronger effect than organization-oriented communication in enhancing employees' positive emotions for using social media. That is, highlighting employees' achievements and showcasing employees' contributions make employees' usage of social media for their organization a joyful and pleasant experience. This positive emotion, in turn, further motivates employees to be engaged on social media and take a more proactive role. Therefore, this study adds to the growing body of knowledge on employees' pro organizational behaviors on social media by demonstrating the effects of organizations' social media-specific internal communication strategies.

Finally, this study contributes to the theorization of employees' social media engagement in public relations literature. Much extant literature described the role of employees' general social media engagement (e.g., Ewing et al., 2019) and advocacy behaviors (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2020). Adding to this line of research, this study considers employees' extra-role social media engagement as part of their OCBs which are voluntary in nature. That is, motivated employees not only engage on social media channels by responding to and communicating with organizations' content and external publics, but also proactively make suggestions and share opinions to improve their company's social media strategies. This behavior has strategic importance for organizations to seek out and expand their opportunities to utilize employees as brand influencers in the new media environment. By demonstrating that organizations' strategic communication approaches can be a key driver of employees' in-role and extra-role social media engagement, this study provides a theoretical basis for understanding the dynamics of employee behaviors on social media.

Practical implications

The findings provide actionable insights for internal public relations practitioners on leveraging social media communication to engage internal stakeholders effectively. Specifically, a balanced communication strategy—incorporating both organization-oriented and employee-oriented approaches—can empower employees to serve as effective brand ambassadors on social media by advocating for their organization and offering constructive feedback to enhance organizational social media practices. Therefore, organizations should first ensure that they are actively present on social media if they already use it as a communication tool, by updating company-related news, information, and events regularly and constantly and promoting the company's products and services to improve online reputation. They could also target internal audiences on social media, by delivering important company-related policies and procedures to keep employees updated and encouraging them to follow and engage with company-related content. Moreover, organizations could consider adopting employee-oriented strategies, by showcasing employee events, gatherings, and office daily lives, and featuring employee awards, contributions, and achievements to acknowledge and show gratitude for their work. This additional approach could help employees to enjoy using social media by triggering their positive emotions and empower them to be advocates and active contributors to organizations' social media programs. Furthermore, our results could serve as a critical communication guideline for scholars, facilitating the conceptualization and measurement of internal social media communication practices and their impact on employee engagement.

Limitations and Future Studies

The current research has several limitations that need to be addressed. First, this study only included participants whose company had social media initiatives and/or programs targeting internal members. In-role behaviors (e.g., like, comment, share) in this study could thus be, in fact, extra-role behaviors for employees whose company does not require any types of social media activities. Future studies could validate our model with more general samples to strengthen the effect of organizations'social media-specific communication strategies on employees' voluntary behaviors. Second, this study did not consider individual level variables in the model. For example, variables such as employees' personality, familiarity with technology, and previous knowledge about social media could be considered in future studies to enrich our understanding of the motivators of employees'social media engagement. Moreover, our study solely focused on social media-specific communication strategies. Future research could examine how organizations' internal communication and corporate culture influence and/or interact with social media communication strategies in influencing employees' social media behaviors.

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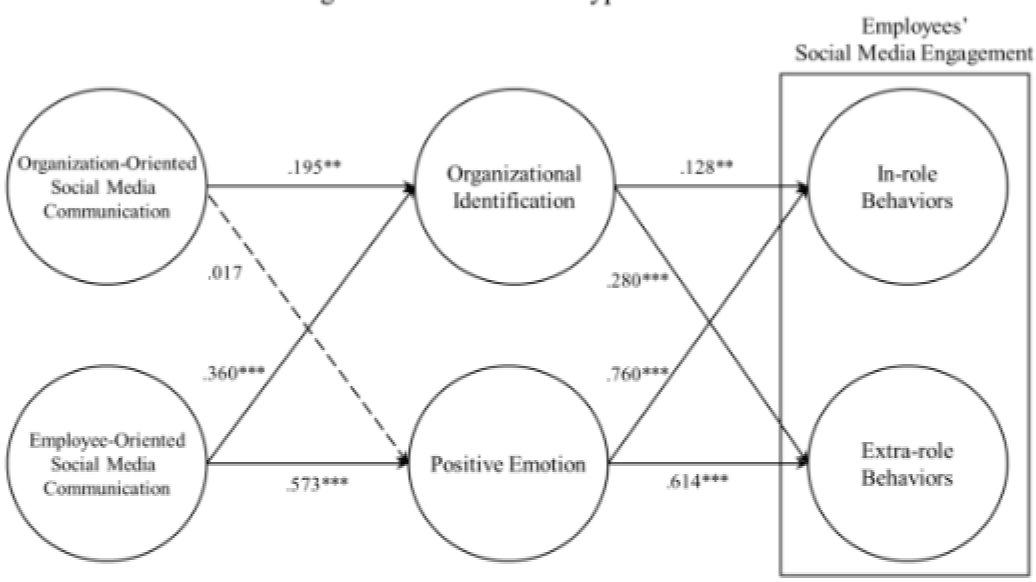
Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among the Variables

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Organization-Oriented Social Media Communication	4.26 (0.86)	-					
2. Employee-Oriented Social Media Communication	4.19 (0.90)	.528**	-				
3. Organizational Identification	4.08 (0.78)	.374**	.431**	-			
4. Positive Emotion	3.93 (.95)	.370**	.551**	.513**	-		
5. In-role Behaviors	3.65 (1.10)	.371**	.541**	.500**	.598**	-	
6. Extra-role Behaviors	3.96 (0.96)	.467**	.645**	.567**	.536**	.575**	-

** $p < .01$

Figure 1. Results of the hypothesized model



** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$
A dotted line indicates an insignificant path.

From Listening to Leading: Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Professionals' Cultural Integration and Career Navigation in Public Relations and Strategic Communication Industry

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Abstract

This study examines the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) professionals in the U.S. public relations and strategic communication fields, focusing on career navigation and cultural integration in a predominantly non-diverse industry. Through qualitative interviews with 22 senior-level AAPI professionals, the research explores how they integrate cultural values into the workplace, the unique challenges they face, and the strategies they use to overcome these barriers. Findings reveal that AAPI professionals leverage their cultural insights, such as active listening, empathy, and adaptability, to enhance workplace dynamics and leadership. However, they navigate challenges including cultural conflicts between traditional Asian values (e.g., modesty, deference) and industry norms (e.g., assertiveness, self-promotion), as well as the underrepresentation of AAPI leadership roles. To overcome these barriers, the study suggests stepping out of cultural comfort zones, fostering self-efficacy, and building collective support networks. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed in the discussion.

Keywords: Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) professionals, Public Relations, Strategic Communication, Cultural Integration, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB)

From Listening to Leading: Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Professionals' Cultural Integration and Career Navigation in Public Relations and Strategic Communication Industry

The public relations profession relies on innovation, creativity, and and cultural relevance to effectively connect organizations with diverse audiences. However, the field continues to struggle with significant diversity challenges within its workforce (Vardeman-Winter & Place, 201; Conner 2023), which can hinder its effectiveness and relevance in an increasingly multicultural society. While recent years have seen a growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, persistent underrepresentation remains a critical issue. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2022, only 2.4% of public relations specialists identify as Asian, highlighting stark disparities in representation (Conner, 2023). Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) professionals in the U.S. are significantly underrepresented in PR roles (Qiu & Muturi, 2016).

The issue of diversity in PR and strategic communication has far-reaching implications for the profession's future. As a discipline rooted in relationship-building, storytelling, and public engagement, understanding diverse perspectives is essential. Having inclusive teams drive better collaboration, produce campaigns that resonate with varied audiences, and enhance problem solving by integrating multiple viewpoints (O'Riordan, 2023). Conversely, the lack of diversity narrows creative output, perpetuates exclusive practices, and erodes public trust in an industry that must represent and advocate for diverse voices (O'Riordan, 2023).

Despite the growing body of literature addressing the experiences of underrepresented groups such as Latinx, Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) in public relations and strategic communication (Pompper, 2004, 2007; Kim, 2023; Neill & Meng, 2021, 2022; Vasquez & Neill, 2023a, 2023b; Qiu & Muturi, 2016; Yue & Thelen, 2024), research specifically focusing on AAPI professionals remains limited. While existing studies have begun to explore workplace challenges and perspectives on diversity (Ni et al., 2022; Qiu & Muturi, 2016), gaps persist in understanding how AAPI professionals integrate their cultural values into the workplace and navigate their career advancement in predominantly non-diverse work environments.

In the post Covid-19 era, the attention to diversity already began to fade from the core issues of organizations. As of 2025, one of the largest public relations and communication firms, Publicis Groupe, removed its chief diversity officer and her team (Rittenhouse & Bonilla, 2025). In addition, major U.S. corporations such as Meta, Ford, Walmart have pushed back their diversity initiatives due to the legal and political climates (Associated Press, 2025). This raises concerns about the sustainability of professions toward inclusivity in the PR field, potentially undermining organizational effectiveness and cultural competence.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the narratives of AAPI professionals in the U.S. public relations and strategic communication fields. It explores how these individuals interpret and navigate their career advancement within the industry where inclusivity remains a pressing issue. By focusing on experiences of AAPI professionals, this study highlights the critical issues of diversity, representation, cultural integration, and career navigation in the field. It underscores the scarcity of AAPI leaders and calls for broader recognition of AAPI professionals' contributions to the profession. This study offers actional insights for the PR profession with the potential inform policy changes and leadership development, enhance organizational listening, and foster initiatives that create a more inclusive and equitable work environment. Such initiatives are essential for advancing not only representation but also innovation, creativity, and cultural competence in the industry.

By incorporating theoretical frameworks such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Brown & Lent, 2016), this research explores how individual and environmental factors intersect in the career development of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) professionals in public relations. Also, the research critically examines inequalities that derive from racial, national, and gender-based hegemonies by incorporating concepts such as “model minority myth” (Chou & Feagin, 2015, Yi et al., 2023), as well as “bamboo ceiling” (Hyun, 2005, Lu, 2022). These are pivotal in understanding the identity construction of Asian American professionals and women in the U.S. context. The findings also provide actionable recommendations for organizations that try to integrate inclusive practice with diverse stakeholders and leadership.

Literature Review

AAPI and Minority Professionals in Public Relations and Strategic Communication

There is is a growing body of literature addressing the experiences of minority professionals in public relations and strategic communication industry (e.g., Pompper, 2004, 2007; Kim, 2023; Neill & Meng, 2021, 2022; Vasquez & Neill, 2023a, 2023b; Yue & Thelen, 2024). However, the experiences of AAPI professionals remain underexplored. Existing research has begun to shed light on their career experiences on diversity and career motivation (Ni et al., 2022; Qiu & Muturi, 2016). For instance, Ni et al. (2022) examined the complex layers of identity within the Asian community in the U.S., highlighting that identity-oriented strategies in intercultural communication can help overcome challenges and facilitate effective communication among individuals with multilayered cultural identities. Similarly, Qiu and Muturi (2016) found that AAPI professionals are underrepresented in the PR field, often overlooked or pigeonholed into minority-specific roles. They identified several barriers, including limited mentorship opportunities, family influence, and misconceptions about the PR profession, which make career pursuits more challenging for aspiring AAPI professionals (Qiu & Muturi, 2016).

Kim (2023) examines social identity signaling in public relations, focusing on job pursuit intentions among students with marginalized racial and ethnic identities, as well as queer identities. The study finds that these students often signal their social identities during job applications, which can influence their perceived fit within organizations and their job pursuit intentions. Lee et al. (2021) provide valuable insights into how diversity-oriented leadership and effective communication can enhance knowledge sharing among employees, particularly minority groups, in internal communication. The research highlights the necessity for organizations to adopt inclusive practices that support collaboration and knowledge exchange, ultimately contributing to a more resilient and innovative workplace (Lee et al., 2021). Research on other minority groups offers valuable insights that can inform the AAPI professional context. Vasquez and Neill (2023a, 2023b) focused on Latina PR professionals in mid- to senior-level positions, exploring how transformative life experiences, or crucible experiences, influence leadership development. They argue that these transformative experiences vary based on cultural identity, such as immigrant versus first-generation status, impacting language proficiency, social integration, and professional advancement. Their findings highlight the importance of fostering DEI initiatives and mentorship for underrepresented groups in the PR industry, which can also be applied to the AAPI professional context in strategic communication field. Yue and Thelen (2024) studied Latinx practitioners and students, identifying challenges in navigating cultural expectations and professional norms. Their research suggests the need for tailored support systems that address the specific experiences of diverse populations in order to enhance their career trajectories.

Moreover, a study indicates that diversity-oriented leadership plays a crucial role in fostering an inclusive workplace environment. Martaningsih and Tjahjono (2022) found that diversity-oriented leadership positively influences employee engagement through strategic internal communication in Malaysia. Based on the findings, it is important to understand that how leadership can create a supportive environment for AAPI professionals in the U.S. public relations and strategic communication industry, enabling them to thrive and contribute effectively. While the existing literature on minority professionals are growing, AAPI professionals is limited. It is clear that their experiences are shaped by complex identity dynamics, workplace challenges, and the need for supportive leadership and communication practices. Addressing these factors is essential for fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment in the public relations and strategic communication industry.

Social Identity Theory

This study utilizes Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) as it pertains to how parts of individuals' self-concepts are derived from perceived membership in social groups. More specifically, it looks at how AAPI communication professionals (dis)identify with certain social groups and how these in- and out-groups shape their work experiences, career trajectories and perceptions of the local DE&I initiatives. Social Identity Theory is concerned with how identities and social beliefs are formed in group settings and through intergroup relations (Hogg, 2018). It suggests that interpersonal and (inter)group practices also shape individuals' self-esteem, which is why people try to belong to groups that boost their self-esteem and steer away from the ones

that reduce it. For instance, a study by Steffens et al. (2021) that focused on the shared social identity of leaders and leader group prototypicality, found that there is a significant impact of leader prototypes on values and behaviors actually associated with leaders.

Model Minority Myth (MMM) and Bamboo Ceiling

This study draws on the model minority myth (MMM) which socially constructs people of Asian backgrounds as being successful in terms of integrating into dominant (white) society (Walton, 2023). They are represented as someone who, despite their minority status and racial differences, are nevertheless well-achieved and easily assimilated into dominant culture. One of the main issues with the assumptions of the MMM is that it claims that people of Asian descent who reside in majority white countries, such as Asian Americans, no longer face social discrimination, which, in turn, is part of the wider problem of viewing Asians as a monolithic culture (Walton, 2023). While Asian Americans are expected to excel academically, and often also live up to this expectation, when they enter the professional world, they often "get stuck on the corporate ladder" and are not assumed to reach the top. This effect is described as the "bamboo ceiling" which refers to the racial and cultural/ethnic discrimination at the workplace that prevents Asian Americans from moving upward in the professional world (Chin, 2020).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

Social Cognitive Career Theory (Brown & Lent, 2016) provides a framework for understanding the complex interplay of personal, contextual, and cognitive factors that influence AAPI professionals' career development and decision-making. SCCT identifies three core constructs—self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals—that shape individuals' career choices and trajectories (Brown & Lent, 2016). Self efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform tasks and achieve career-related outcomes, which significantly impacts their career choices and persistence in the face of challenges (Brown & Lent, 2016). Outcome expectations involve the anticipated consequences of engaging in specific career-related behaviors, influencing the paths individuals pursue. Personal goals serve as motivational drivers, guiding individuals toward specific aspirations and helping them prioritize their efforts (Brown & Lent, 2016). SCCT provides a valuable lens for understanding the career navigation experiences of AAPI professionals in the industry. For example, research highlights the critical role of self-efficacy in shaping career aspirations and decisions, particularly for underrepresented groups (Fouad & Santana, 2016). AAPI professionals may draw on their unique cultural perspectives to enhance self-efficacy in communication roles, facilitating their career advancement. Moreover, SCCT offers a foundation for examining how contextual challenges, such as discrimination or underrepresentation, significantly impact career development (Domínguez et al., 2022).

Thus, this study examines the interplay between personal beliefs, cultural influences, and organizational contexts, exploring the career experiences of AAPI professionals. Therefore, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways do AAPI professionals integrate their cultural insights to their workplace?

RQ2-a: What are the unique challenges faced by AAPI professionals in the public relations and strategic communication, **RQ2-b:** how do they overcome them?

Method

This study employs semi-structured in-depth interviews to explore the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) professionals in public relations and strategic communication in the United States. The interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, with durations ranging from 45 minutes to one hour and 20 minutes. Interview protocols, questions, and informed consent forms were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) on October 3, 2023.

Sampling

We utilized purposive and snowball sampling methods to recruit participants meeting the study's criteria. Target participants were working professionals who self-identified as having an AAPI cultural background regardless of their generational or immigrant status, possess at least five years of industry experience, and could provide relevant insights into the topic. Initial contacts were made through personalized emails and LinkedIn messages that introduced the researchers and outlined the project's scope. Subsequent participants were often recruited through referrals from initial interviewees, expanding the participant pool through their professional networks. The sampling process was begun in September 2023 and ended in May 2024. Interviews were conducted from October 2023 to May 2024.

Participants

This study included 22 participants, consisting of 15 females and 7 males, with an average of 21 years of experience in the public relations and strategic communication industry. Their career spans ranged from 9 years to over 35 years, with 15 participants having more than 19 years of experience. This diverse group brings a wealth of professional expertise across various roles and sectors within the industry. Participants represented a broad range of professional backgrounds, working in both corporate and agency environments. Some have corporate roles in public relations, and internal communication, global communication, some own public relations and marketing consulting firms, and others work in agencies that intersect with public relations and advertising showcasing the multifaceted nature of their career experiences. The participants also reflected a rich diversity of AAPI heritages, including

Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Taiwanese identities. Geographically, the majority were based in the New York Metropolitan area and California. In terms of educational background, participants held a range of advanced degrees, including bachelor's and master's degrees, as well as professional degrees such as J.D. and MBA, and doctoral degrees.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted by researchers from October 2023 to May 2024. Each session was voice-recorded under strict confidentiality measures, utilizing pseudonyms for participants. The recordings were automatically transcribed via Zoom, and researchers and trained graduate students meticulously reviewed and corrected these transcripts by listening to the recorded interviews to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data. Participants were compensated with $20, funded by an internal grant from the researcher's university. At the start of each session, researchers provided an overview of the study's objectives, data collection processes, and data security measures. Participants were required to sign informed consent forms, affirming their voluntary participation and agreement to the audio recording of the interviews. To further safeguard privacy, all personal information was protected, and participants' identities were anonymized with coded identifiers in all research documentation. The interview protocol focused on eliciting participants' perspectives and experiences related to their personal and professional development in the public relations and strategic communication industry.

Data Analysis

For the analysis of the qualitative data derived from these interviews, the research team employed thematic analysis grounded in data, this open coding process identifies dominant themes relevant to the study's research questions. The typed transcripts were a total of over 245 pages with single-spaced text for data analysis. Two researchers independently reviewed the transcript data, conducting several rounds of open coding to pinpoint key themes. Analyst triangulation was integral to this process, as it involved multiple rounds of analysis and collaborative discussions among the researchers. This strategy helped to ensure a robust and comprehensive identification of the dominant and recurring themes that emerged from our data, which are detailed in the result section.

Result

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed several key findings about the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communication professionals in the U.S. public relations and strategic communication industry. These findings indicate that these professionals often navigate significant cultural contrasts between their inherent communication styles, which may emphasize modesty and deference, and the industry's expectations for outspokenness, assertiveness, and proactivity. Challenges in seeking mentorship and balancing professional and personal responsibilities were also highlighted, underlining the complexities faced in the U.S. communication field.

RQ1: In what ways do AAPI professionals integrate their cultural insights to their workplace?

The research question asked in what ways asian professionals leverage their cultural insights to their work and career development in the industry. The interview data highlights how Asian professionals in the communication industry navigate the intersection of cultural identity and professional success. The findings identified four dominant themes based on data analysis. ***1. Importance of Listening and Observing.*** Most participants reflected on how their cultural backgrounds taught them the value of listening, observing, and understanding before acting. They were able to observe and listen deeply in the workplace, enabling them to gain nuanced insights into organizational dynamics and client relationships. Few participants who have Korean cultural background mentioned about the practice of *nunci*, that is the Korean cultural concept of emotional and social awareness of sensing subtle cues, has made them better at reading clients and team dynamics, giving them a professional edge.

> **Interviewee 17**. "*Nunchi* is like I feel like that needs to be bottled and people need to drink that every day. I can tell when a client's unhappy so much faster than anyone else. I think that ability to pick up on subtle cues has really helped me in my career." (Female, PR/Marketing agency owner, 20+ years of experience)
>
> **Interviewee 21**. I was absolutely subconsciously, in a role where I was very quiet. And listening, listening... Why was that good? Because you're observing, you're intensely listening to understand what is happening, people's perspectives, their opinions, their silence... I think the skill of observation is not as valued as it should be." (Male, senior level corporate communicator, 35+years of experience)

Collective Support with Humility and Empathy. Many participants highlighted on how cultural values of empathy, humility, and collective support, rooted in their Asian cultures, shaped their professional behaviors. They believe that these values were seen as strengths in fostering team cohesion and understanding. This theme underscores how interviewees draw on empathy and humility to lead effectively while navigating the challenges of balancing these values with industry norms.

> **Interviewee 18**: "I'm leading a multi-generational team with team members who have different priorities and different backgrounds [...] in our industry reading the news being attuned to what's going on a lot of times,[...] being attuned to a lot of bad things going on. I think that has allowed me to be more empathetic if you will, because it's a harder time to be a professional. Then I remember if I was an account executive or in the client work, I don't know if it was as complex as it is now. (Female, senior-level leader at PR agency, 15+ years of experience)
>
> **Interviewee 20**: I think the culture of what you really sort of underpins our company culture, a very inclusive and empathetic. A culture marked with humility. All of those aspects of our culture really important because we are in such a fairly high pressure, high performing environment. [...] that are stem from [my] culture, this multi-ethnic, sort of melting pot, tolerance and appreciation of other cultures and perspectives. I think it really creates a very healthy work place environment. (Female, PR/Marketing agency owner, 20+ years of experience)

Adaptation and Hardworking. Participants emphasized the continuous effort required to adapt their behaviors to navigate between cultural expectations and professional norms. As AAPI professionals, they often faced the challenge of balancing their cultural heritage, which emphasizes humility and deference, with the demand of the industry which values self promotion and proactivity. This dual identity required them to constantly adapt while simultaneously reshaping their behaviors to meet the professional demands of their environments.

> **Interviewee 16**: "you must do some advocacy for yourself. You can't just keep your head down and hope to be recognized [...] " (Male, senior-level leader at PR agency, 15+ years of experience)
>
> **Interviewee 15**: "It's common for people to assume that most Asian professionals are shy or meek in the workplace, less willing to speak up. So I've had to make more of an effort, almost like overcorrecting for that [...] by making sure I contribute, speak up during a meeting, say something from a professional point of view or perspective"

(Male, senior level leader at NGO, 15+ years of experience)

Inclusive Leadership. Participants addressed how their cultural backgrounds provided them with valuable insights when leading their workplace including Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) initiatives. Their lived experiences fostered a deep understanding of diverse perspectives, which they leveraged to create more inclusive environments within their organizations. This perspective was viewed as a significant asset in shaping workplace policies, strategies, and programs that support diverse and equitable teams.

> **Interviewee 19**: "I came with a clear vision and purpose that I want to create an environment where all people of different backgrounds, different races, upbringings, gender, identities as well as those in the disabled community[...]where equity and inclusiveness matters where you can do your best work because I had that similar experience [...] what I bring from my cultural background and trying to create a space where everybody can thrive matters to so many people outside of just race and identity, gender identity." (Male, division leader at PR agency, 17+ years of experience)

RQ2-a: What are the unique challenges faced by AAPI professionals in the public relations and strategic communication, RQ2-b: how do they overcome them?

When asked about the career-related challenges that the AAPI communication professionals face, the majority of the interviewees mentioned the discord between traditional Asian cultural values and expectations for U.S. communication professionals/leaders; and the lack of Asian leaders in the field. The interviewees also provided ways that they have overcome these challenges, including stepping out of their cultural comfort zone; believing in their individual capability to overcome work-related hardships and cultural stereotypes; and finding their voice together with other AAPI communication professionals.

Cultural Conflict: Asian Cultural Values vs. American Communication Industry Norms. The majority of the participants claimed that the Confucian cultural values that include keeping one's head down and doing the work without questioning, respecting the elders/superiors, quietness over outspokeness, etc., clash with the expectations that they believe are crucial for thriving in the U.S. professional field, such as take up space, have a broader presence, speak up, draw attention to oneself, and invest in oneself.:

> **Interviewee 16:** "[F]rom a cultural perspective, in Asian cultures or in Confucius cultures, I grew up being told by my parents that you keep your head down and you do the hard work, and you will eventually be recognized. the older I get the real, the more I realize that that's not necessarily true. […] Our Asian disposition or Asian inclination to be more quiet than loud, I think, does hurt us in the workplace." (Male, senior-level leader at PR agency, 15+ years of experience)

> **Interviewee 13:** "The inclination to keep our heads down and adhere to paternalism, Confucianism, hierarchy, and structure is deeply ingrained in our culture.[…] Standing up in front of others, speaking personally, putting out a vision, taking risks, engaging in hard, sort of bare-knuckle corporate politics. You have to speak up. You cannot go into a senior management meeting and just sit there silently because that's not what you're there to do. It marks you as not belonging to the group. (Male, senior-level corporate communicator, 35+ years of experience)

Lack of Asian Leaders and Representation. Another great challenge, especially for the AAPI professionals who had reached to leadership positions, was the lack of AAPI in leading roles in the field of PR and strategic communication in the U.S. The participants mentioned that more than often they are the "literally the only Asian person in the room" (Interviewee 16) during the leadership meetings. They mention that it creates barriers when connecting to other leaders as well as impedes Asian professionals getting access to certain community resources.

> **Interviewee 8:** "one of the things that can be very challenging is when I'm in the room with people, I can connect with people. But I'm the only Asian person in the room or there's a lack of diversity when it comes to leadership in the Asian community, because we can't really see Asian people don't get access to these community resources (Female, PR agency owner, 20+ years of experience)

RQ2-b. How do they overcome those challenges?

Stepping out of the Cultural Comfort Zone. The dominant thread under this theme describes how it is often up to an Asian American individual to push oneself hard, code switch and sometimes even act against the cultural values embedded in them, and to downplay their "Asianness" to succeed in the U.S. communication field. This includes coaching oneself to speak up, to be more extroverted, feeling less of a subordinate, etc. Interviewee #16 explains:

> **Interviewee 16:** as a person who's inclined toward being more a a quiet, introverted, more introspective.[...] I've had to learn over the course of my career is to push myself outside of my comfort zone, to be more demonstrably loud, to be more demonstrably present. (Male, senior-level leader at PR agency, 15+ years of experience)

> **Interviewee 18:** you do need to speak up and sort of be a nuisance and actually the fact that I had a boss that would actually yell at me if I was at a meeting and I only took notes, he would actually kick me out of the meeting. He'd be like, don't come back to this meeting if you don't have anything to add. So he forced me to be different, like to kind of get out of my skin and actually speak up (Female, senior-level leader at PR agency, 20+ years of experience)

Believing in Self-Efficacy. This theme focused on the participants' relationship, embodiment, and reaction to Asian American cultural stereotypes in the field of communication. While most of the interviewees acknowledged the cultural stereotypes, they nevertheless believed that it is one's individual responsibility to overcome these archetypes on their own and prove them wrong. So, many respondents did not look at stereotyping as an example of racial hegemony that should be approached at the structural level. Interviewee #19 describes the feelings of subordination as his personal issues:

> **Interviewee 19:** It takes effort and energy years of experience sitting down having conversations and coaching myself and evaluating those experiences and then having phenomenal mentors that encourage me to speak up and try new things. (Male, division leader at PR agency, 15+ years of experience)

Interviewee 8 bolsters the model minority myth, insisting that it is Asian Americans' responsibility to assimilate and adapt the professional values of the U.S. communication culture.

> **Interviewee 8:** I have heard of young Asian people that have said that they didn't get a job a firm because they said that they didn't really encompass the American culture, but the Asian culture is in the American culture.(Female, PR agency owner, 20+ years of experience)

Building Collective Support. This strategy focused on the ways Asian American(s leaders) can find support by belonging to different unions, having mentors and coaches who share similar cultural and professional experiences with them. In other words, it utilizes Asians' collective cultural values, encouraging them to find voices in unison with others who share their cultural experiences. Instead of attempting to assimilate to the dominant culture, Interviewee #16 describes that there are other ways to be leaders.

> **Interviewee 16:** Our Asianness can sometimes be a limiter to our career advancement, and so, being able to come together and articulate reasons why we are successful and good leaders, and maybe different kinds of leaders than kind of like the type A leaders that my previous white woman boss thought, was the only way to be that there are other ways to be leaders right. It comes down to this notion that visibility matters. (Male, senior-level leader at PR agency, 15+ years of experience)
>
> **Interviewee 11:** I surround myself with a lot of peers. That it's not necessarily like they're my mentor advisor, but they have different experiences that I can reach out and get their perspective. But having people that are not necessarily from the same industry has been helpful. (Female, PR/Marketing agency owner, 20 years of experience)

Discussion

This study highlights the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) professionals in the U.S. public relations and strategic communication fields, focusing on how they navigate career advancement in an industry where inclusivity remains a pressing issue. The findings provide critical insights into how AAPI professionals integrate their cultural perspectives into the workplace, the unique challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles.

Findings from RQ1 highlighted how their cultural backgrounds shaped their professional behaviors and approaches, offering valuable contributions to the industry. The importance of listening and observing emerged as a central theme, with participants leveraging these skills to gain nuanced insights into organizational dynamics and client relationships. Many also emphasized collective support, humility, and empathy, rooted in their cultural values, as instrumental in fostering inclusive and collaborative work environments. Participants described adaptation and hard work as essential to balancing bicultural identities. They consciously adjusted their behaviors to be more vocal and assertive to navigate the professional demands of the industry. AAPI professionals' cultural perspectives further informed their ability to practice inclusive leadership, enabling them to foster environments where diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) were prioritized.

Findings from RQ2a and RQ2b uncovered that participants identified two primary challenges in their professional journeys. Interviewees claimed that some of the greatest career related challenges faced by the AAPI professionals and leaders are the substantial differences between their Confucian cultural values - such as modesty, collectivism, respect of elders - and what is expected of them in the professional field of U.S. communication leaders - assertiveness, broad presence, speaking up. Another obstacle that was mentioned often, was the lack of AAPI leaders in the field, there was not many prototype leaders whom they could have tried to identify with. Besides describing the challenges that Asian Americans face in the professional communication field, the interviewees also listed strategies that they have utilized to overcome these obstacles, including stepping out of their cultural comfort zone; believing in self-efficacy to overcome work-related hardships and cultural stereotypes; and building collective support with other Asian American communication professionals.

Theoretical implications

This study extends Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) by examining how personal, contextual, and cognitive factors shape the career development of AAPI professionals in public relations and strategic communication. The findings highlight SCCT's relevance in exploring self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals, particularly for underrepresented groups facing unique challenges. First, the study underscores the critical role of self-efficacy in overcoming professional barriers. AAPI professionals navigate tensions between traditional cultural norms, such as modesty and deference, and industry demands for assertiveness and visibility, demonstrating how self-efficacy enables adaptability and career progression. Second, the findings emphasize the influence of contextual factors, such as limited leadership representation and access to mentorship, in shaping career trajectories. These align with SCCT's focus on environmental variables that can hinder or facilitate professional growth. Third, this study expands SCCT by incorporating the impact of bicultural identities and related stereotypes, such as the model minority myth and the bamboo ceiling. It highlights how navigating dual cultural expectations fosters unique strategies to balance personal goals and organizational demands, enriching SCCT with the complexity of cultural identity in career development. Finally, in regards to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and leader group prototypicality (Steffens et al., 2021), this study highlights the importance of having diverse and multicultural leader types that the AAPI communication professionals and managers could relate to. This, in turn, could expand the (Western dominant) ideas and values associated with leadership in the field of communication.

Practical implications

This study offers actionable insights for organizations to foster inclusion, address disparities, and leverage the strengths of AAPI professionals in the strategic communication industry. First, empathy, and adaptability, that enhance workplace dynamics and relationships. Organizations should integrate those cultural competences into professional development programs, emphasizing the benefits of active listening and nuanced observations for strategic communication practices. Second, fostering an inclusive organizational culture. Findings indicate that AAPI professionals often experience bicultural conflicts and the distress associated with balancing dual cultural expectations. This was also found in study with Latina public relations professionals (Vasquez & Neill, 2023a), thus, acknowledging their challenges and creating an inclusive culture that values all employees' cultural contributions can help mitigate the barriers. Organizations should prioritize celebrating diverse cultural values rather than elevating specific ones. Inclusive politics should focus on teamwork and collaboration over ratical or cultural labeling. Including AAPI professionals in decision-making processes while sharing both positive and negative information in organization can reinforce their sense of belonging and engagement (Lee et al., 2021).

In addition, cultivating collective support systems will help underrepresented employees' career advancement. This study found a lack of AAPI leadership representation as a significant challenge. Organizations should invest in leadership training programs, peer coaching, and mentorship opportunities, both internally and through professional associations. This aligns with Vasquez and Neill's study (2023b) suggestions on Latina PR professionals' (immigrants and first-gen) who benefit from instrumental help such as seeking mentors in professional associations such as HACE (Hispanic Alliance for Career Enhancement). Similarly, building role models and mentorship networks of Asian American professionals in public relations field would inspiring younger generations and early career professionals (Qiu & Muturi, 2016). Current study findings also indicates that participating in professional associations and groups strengthen their career goals. senior leaders must commit to promoting diverse perspectives and leadership styles, as their engagement is critical to fostering an inclusive culture. Promoting diverse perspective and leadership styles will require a strong commitment from existing senior leaders, whose engagement is critical to fostering an inclusive culture (Kim, 2023, Vasquez & Neill, 2023a).

In conclusion, public relations and strategic communication industry thrives on creativity and collaborations, making it imperative to empower individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. By addressing challenges, fostering inclusion, and supporting career advancement, organizations can build a more equitable and innovative workforce.

Limitations and Future Research Direction

This study employs a qualitative research method with purposive sampling, which provides in depth insights into the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) professionals in the public relations and strategic communication industry. However, it also presents certain limitations that warrant consideration. First, while qualitative methods capture nuanced perspectives, future research should incorporate a mixed-methods approach to strengthen the generalizability and comprehensiveness of findings. Quantitative studies examine predictive factors influencing AAPI professionals' career development and organizational changes within the industry will inform our understanding. For example, survey-based research could identify trends in career progression, the impact of cultural integration strategies, and their relationship to organizational outcomes. Second, the study's sample primarily comprises senior-level professionals with an average of 21 years of experience. Although their perspectives offer valuable insights into the challenges and strategies for long-term career navigation, the experiences of entry-level or early-career professionals, particularly those from AAPI Gen Z, remain underexplored. Future research should focus on this group to better understand their motivations, aspirations, and challenges as they begin to navigate the strategic communication industry. Such studies could provide a more holistic view of career development across different stages of professional growth. By addressing these limitations, future research can expand on this study's findings to develop a more comprehensive understanding of diverse talents in the public relations and strategic communication industry.

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Legitimizing AI: Ethical AI in Corporate Ethics Statements

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Abstract

This study examines organizations' ethics statements on artificial intelligence (AI). Drawing on the legitimacy framework, this study investigates how these statements serve as mechanisms to align organizational AI practices with stakeholder expectations, establish ethical benchmarks, and deploy strategic legitimation cues. Among the *Fortune* Global 500 and *Forbes* AI 50 companies, 101 (18.36%) have published corporate AI ethics statements. A quantitative content analysis of these statements reveals that intelligibility, safety, and justice are widely recognized as key ethical AI standards. The statements frequently address customers and employees as primary stakeholders, emphasizing intelligibility and privacy for customers and safety, intelligibility, and accountability for employees. Substantive cues are more prevalent than symbolic cues in legitimizing these ethical AI standards. The findings offer valuable insights for corporate management and communication professionals and a foundational guideline for developing and evaluating corporate AI ethics statements.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence (AI), AI ethics, ethics codes, legitimacy, corporate communication, stakeholder management

Legitimizing AI: Ethical AI in Corporate Ethics Statements

The adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) in business is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the public recognizes AI's potential to enhance efficiency and optimize workflows (McKinsey, 2024). On the other hand, mounting ethical concerns—such as the "black box," which refers to the opacity of AI decision-making processes, as well as deepfakes, data privacy, accountability, and bias—have raised significant apprehensions (Bélisle-Pipon et al., 2023; Ouchchy et al., 2020). Only 30% of respondents to the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer expressed confidence in AI (Edelman, 2024). Unethical AI incidents have repeatedly harmed organizational reputations, such as in the cases of Amazon's gender-biased AI recruitment system in 2014, Tesla's Autopilot accident in 2021, and deepfake fraud causing significant financial losses and dominating headlines in 2024 (Digital Defynd, n.d.). Such ethical dilemmas threaten the legitimacy of corporate AI applications (Korneeva et al., 2023), potentially undermining stakeholder acceptance (Solberg et al., 2022) and eroding trust in corporate responsibility (Olatoye, 2024).

Responding to stakeholder concerns related to the ethical use of AI, corporations have increasingly promoted the concept of "ethical AI," also known as "responsible AI." Companies, particularly among the *Fortune* 500 and *Forbes* AI 50, such as Walmart, Google, Microsoft, OpenAI, and LangChain, have developed formal corporate AI ethics statements governing AI use as a means of legitimizing their AI practices. These statements often set out standards and guidelines aimed at ensuring the ethical deployment of AI technologies. More importantly, through the articulation of these AI ethics statements, companies can signal their commitment to corporate digital responsibility, reinforcing their legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders (Fernando & Lawrence, 2014), and fostering trust in corporate AI practices (Ki & Kim, 2010; Stevens, 1994). Consequently, corporate AI ethics statements have become a vital component of corporate communication and a cornerstone of corporate responsibility in the era of AI.

Unlike AI ethics statements issued by government agencies, research institutions, and professional associations, corporate AI ethics statements address not only morality and compliance but also business legitimacy goals. Drawing on legitimacy theory, companies need to establish ethical standards and address stakeholders' needs to sustain the legitimacy of corporate AI ethics (Liu & Sun, 2024). However, when they lack substantive content, these statements risk being dismissed as "ethics washing" and undermining the legitimacy of AI initiatives. To effectively harness ethics statements to reinforce the legitimacy of corporate AI practices, the current research extends a legitimacy framework to examine corporate AI ethics statements from 2024 *Fortune* Global 500 and *Forbes* AI 50 companies. Content analysis is used to examine how these ethics statements legitimize corporate AI practices by establishing ethical standards, aligning corporate AI practices with stakeholders' expectations, and deploying legitimation cues.

This study contributes to public relations scholarship and corporate practice in four key ways. First, it enhances the understanding of corporate AI ethics statements as a tool for building legitimacy through the public relations lens. Second, it provides an evidence-based legitimacy framework for communicating corporate AI ethics, underscoring the need to align corporate AI practices with universal AI ethics and stakeholder expectations to build stakeholder trust. Third, it offers insights into how to effectively apply substantive legitimation cues to strengthen the legitimacy of corporate AI practices. Last, it provides practical guidance to help corporate management and communication practitioners create robust AI ethics statements.

Literature Review

Legitimacy

Legitimacy, a vital concept in corporate communication management and business ethics, is "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Legitimacy is essential to the survival of a company and its activities and is a key factor in gaining stakeholder recognition and support (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006).

Legitimacy is a lens through which to study stakeholders' assessments regarding the appropriateness and acceptability of technology adoption and development. When the practices of emerging technology successfully obtain and maintain legitimacy, public acceptance increases (Korneeva et al., 2023, Liu & Sun, 2024). Scholars have studied the impact of AI decision-making on legitimacy, revealing that ethical and robust decision-making systems enhance public perception of legitimacy (de Fine Licht & de Fine Licht, 2020). One of the earliest studies on AI legitimacy in the communication domain analyzed its representation in media disclosure, which found that workplace automation reinforces legitimacy. Whereas ethical concerns pose challenges (Korneeva et al., 2023). However, there is limited research on how companies actively maintain the legitimacy of their AI practices. Since corporations are the driving force of AI development, how they legitimize their AI practices through their communication management efforts warrants further attention.

Ethics Statement in Corporate Communication Management

An ethics statement is a written document in which an organization presents its standards to guide and assess ethical and professional norms among its members (Ki & Kim, 2010). The term, ethics statement has been used interchangeably with several other terms, including codes of ethics, codes of conduct, and codes of practice (Ki & Kim, 2010). Corporate AI ethics statements are typically included on corporate websites as "AI principles," "code of ethics for AI," "responsible AI statement," and "trustworthy AI solutions." These statements include not only ethical AI standards and guidelines but also the progress of ethical AI deployment.

Prior research emphasized the role of the corporate ethics statement in encouraging and educating ethical practices in internal stakeholder management (e.g., Ki et al., 2012; Murphy, 1995). It also represents a company's awareness of corporate responsibility toward external stakeholders (Sacconi, 1999). It serves as a legitimacy mechanism for companies, signaling to both internal and external stakeholders that the company is committed to ethical standards and engages in socially responsible conduct (Long & Driscoll, 2008; McKinney et al., 2010). More importantly, it can enhance their trust in the company's business activities (Jiménez et al., 2021). In corporate AI practices, stakeholder trust plays a vital role in fostering acceptance of companies' AI adoption and desirable organization-public relationships (Huang & Ki, 2023). Stakeholder trust in AI practices is declining (Edelman, 2024), making it essential for businesses to take action to restore trust. In response, many companies have developed corporate AI ethics statements as a means of legitimizing their AI practices to rebuild stakeholder trust. Given the growing need for organizations to establish legitimacy and build stakeholder trust in AI, a corporate AI ethics statement in this study is defined as *a written document of standards designed by a company to legitimize its AI practices and to signal to stakeholders about its commitment or conduct related to the ethical use of AI*.

While substantial research has examined ethical AI guidelines by government agencies and research institutions (e.g., Floridi & Cowls, 2021; Elliott et al., 2021), the extent to which businesses attach importance to AI ethics statements and how they release them online remains unexplored. Thus, we pose the following research questions:

RQ1: What proportion of *Fortune* Global 500 and *Forbes* AI 50 companies have established AI ethics statements?

Standards for Ethical AI

Ethical AI refers to the practice of adopting AI with good intentions to empower businesses, ensuring a positive impact on publics and society (Eitel-Porter, 2021). Ethical AI standards form the foundation of ethical AI deployment and constitute the core content of corporate AI ethics statements. Similar to general ethics statements, providing specific standards in AI ethics statements helps maintain legitimacy (Long & Driscoll, 2008). Industry and academia have proposed numerous recommendations for ethical AI standards frameworks as references in developing AI ethics statements (e.g., Ashok et al., 2022; Floridi & Cowls, 2021). Floridi et al. (2018) proposed a framework that includes five ethical AI principles: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability. Jobin et al. (2019) identified a global convergence around these five principles, but differences remain in their interpretation. The most frequently referenced ethical AI standards in literature include well-being, sustainability, safety, privacy, autonomy, justice, intelligibility, and accountability (e.g., Corrêa et al., 2023; Jobin et al., 2019). *Well-being* refers to safeguarding human dignity and promoting the well-being of individuals. *Sustainability* is defined as mitigating environmental impact and promoting a positive view of the future planet. *Safety* is protecting users from physical or mental harm caused by AI. *Privacy* refers to safeguarding personal data by ensuring consent and preventing unauthorized surveillance and data collection. *Autonomy* is defined as ensuring that AI does not infringe on human decision-making power and maintains human agency. *Justice* is defined as being fair and mitigating biases. *Intelligibility* refers to providing transparent and explainable AI systems and governance to users/stakeholders. *Accountability* is the ethical sense and mechanism of who is responsible for AI operations (Ashok et al. 2022; Jobin et al., 2019).

Although studies have examined ethical standards in AI ethics statements from policy documents and professional guidelines (e.g., Crossnohere et al., 2022; Floridi et al., 2018), no existing research has specifically investigated the presence of ethical AI standards in corporate AI ethics statements. Compared to other types of organizations, companies operate with a profit-driven motive, which may lead to different emphases on ethical standards. To provide an understanding of how companies legitimize AI practices by means of ethical standards, we examine the deployment of the abovementioned eight standards in corporate AI ethics statements. The following research question guides this aspect of this study:

RQ2: Which ethical AI standards are frequently emphasized, and which are minimally addressed by companies?

Stakeholder Management

Stakeholders play a crucial role in shaping the legitimacy of companies and their activities. Companies must gain legitimacy by aligning their practices with stakeholders' expectations (Burlea & Popa, 2013). A company's ethics statement serves as a governance mechanism by projecting ethical norms regarding the treatment of various stakeholder groups to meet their expectations. Such a statement can facilitate mutual trust, image, and reputation of the company concerning its stakeholders, thereby improving long-term performance and forming a sustainable competitive advantage (Jones et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2005).

Most management and public relations scholars have examined the role of ethics statements in internal management, highlighting their importance in guiding internal stakeholders to make appropriate decisions and take ethical actions (e.g., Ki et al., 2012). However, in AI governance, focusing solely on internal stakeholders is insufficient. AI applications, such as monitoring and decision-making systems, directly affect external stakeholder groups, raising concerns about data privacy, fairness, and decision-making (Ouchchy et al., 2020). Scholars argue that companies should adopt a multi-stakeholder perspective—including shareholders, customers, employees, suppliers, and communities—when developing AI-related business strategies (Güngör, 2020). To address these varied interests, companies must signal their ethical AI standards to these stakeholders.

Because stakeholder interests and expectations regarding corporate AI practices vary, companies need to prioritize stakeholders based on their level of power and influence (Mitchell et al., 1997). Kim and Rader (2010) emphasize that companies often focus on meeting the expectations of powerful stakeholders in their communication efforts. To assess stakeholder salience in corporate AI practices, we propose the following research question:

RQ3: Which group of stakeholders is most emphasized in corporate AI ethics statements?

In traditional corporate communication, stakeholders primarily focus on corporate ability and social responsibility (Kim & Rader, 2010). Similarly, AI stakeholders are concerned with AI's capability to empower human abilities while emphasizing ethical responsibilities, such as safety and transparency. However, AI-related ethical issues affect different stakeholder groups in distinct ways. For example, customers prioritize concerns around cybersecurity and privacy risks posed by AI (Du & Xie, 2021). Employees focus on safety and privacy concerns while fearing potential loss of autonomy and job displacement (Miller, 2022). Government bodies and policymakers, though less directly involved in AI operations, emphasize governance and adherence to ethical standards (Sharma, 2024). The explainability of AI, with features such as interpretability and accountability, is widely regarded as a foundational condition that supports other ethical principles, making it highly valued by all AI stakeholders (Floridi & Cowls, 2021). Given these varying expectations, companies must strategically align ethical AI standards with stakeholder needs to develop their AI ethics statements. This leads to the following research question:

RQ4: Is there any relationship between ethical AI standards and primary stakeholder groups?

Legitimation Strategies and Ethics Washing

Incorporating legitimation strategies into corporate communication materials can strengthen the legitimacy of business practices, thereby gaining stakeholder support (Hahn and Lülfs, 2014; Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018). The literature on legitimacy provides a symbolic/substantive typology to distinguish legitimation strategies (e.g., Allen, 2016; Eng et al., 2024; Hahn & Lülfs, 2014). Substantive legitimation strategies are ways of providing information on how a company will introduce potentially cost-generating changes in corporate goals, structures, and actions, while symbolic strategies only focus on altering stakeholder perceptions without implementing real measures or far-reaching changes (Hahn & Lülfs, 2014; Hahn et al., 2021). Ethics statements might include symbolic or substantive strategies (Stevens et al., 2005). In terms of information cues in ethics statements that reflect these strategies, based on previous definitions, we define a *symbolic cue* as ethics statement content that contains goals and commitments without enforcement, and a *substantive cue* as ethics statement content that includes concrete actions and enforcement mechanisms.

Both symbolic and substantive management are crucial for organizations in achieving their public relations goals (Grunig, 1993). However, symbolic strategies have weaker positive effects on legitimacy compared to substantive strategies (e.g., Berrone et al., 2009; Hahn et al., 2021; Kim et al. 2007). The reason for this is that symbolic strategies are only impression management which may lead to a decoupling effect, while substantive strategies can serve as accountability for specific stakeholders (Hahn et al., 2021). Substantive cues are also regarded as higher-quality information (Faisal et al., 2019; Hahn et al., 2021).

In terms of corporate environmental responsibility, symbolic strategies are often criticized as "greenwashing," by which companies project an image of environmental responsibility without taking substantive actions (Walker & Wan, 2011). Similarly, ethical AI standards have faced scrutiny for lacking meaningful mechanisms and actions, a practice labeled "ethics washing," which refers to presenting superficial ethical commitments to shape public perception without implementing tangible changes, akin to symbolic public relations campaigns that create the illusion of progress (Bowen, 2024). We can assume that if an AI ethics statement applies substantive cues, it will elicit more positive perceptions from stakeholders than only using symbolic cues (Stevens et al., 2005). Since one of this study's objectives is to explore the quality of corporate AI ethics statements in legitimizing companies' ethical AI practices, we aim to examine whether companies incorporate higher-quality legitimation cues (i.e., substantive cues). Therefore, we ask:

> **RQ5**: Which type of legitimation cues (symbolic or substantive) do companies most often use in corporate AI ethics statements to align with ethical AI standards?

Method

To answer our research questions, we conducted a quantitative content analysis of 2024 *Fortune* Global 500 and *Forbes* AI 50 companies' AI ethics statements. We investigated these companies' AI ethics statements for several reasons. *Fortune* Global 500 companies represent the largest corporations ranked by total revenue, while *Forbes* AI 50 companies are AI industry-leading startups that excel in revenue, technology, talent, and business growth. As leading companies, they are more likely to proactively develop and disclose their ethics codes (Schwartz, 2002). They possess superior resources to deploy AI and corporate digital responsibility and are therefore seen as leaders in AI ethics in the business sector (Lundberg, 2024). Moreover, there is no overlap between the two lists as they represent distinct categories of business size. Examining both offers a more comprehensive understanding of leading companies' AI ethics statements. More significantly, the communication materials of leading companies, especially those featured in the *Fortune* and *Forbes* ranking, are often studied as benchmark cases in corporate communication research (Kim & Rader, 2010).

Data Collection

The data collection period spanned from October 15 to 30, 2024. We first searched for AI ethics statements on each *Fortune* Global 500 and *Forbes* AI 50 company's official website. In addition, we used the Google search engine to search for company names plus one of the keywords "ethical AI," "responsible AI," or "AI responsibility" to ensure no AI ethics statements were missed. We initially identified 114 companies that have AI ethics statements. During the data cleaning process, seven were excluded since they were recommendations from companies or executives regarding AI ethics for industries, rather than specific standards for their company; three were excluded as they are AI companies' value and mission statements rather than focusing on ethical AI-related conduct; another three were excluded because they are AI ethics technology toolkit descriptions and do not propose ethical principles.

Ultimately, the remaining 101 companies' AI ethics statements were used for the main analysis. We also included webpages of companies' AI ethics statements in further analysis, as well as the webpages or downloadable files linked in these pages, as they may contain more detailed information regarding ethical AI standards.

Measurements

Ethical AI Standards

We coded the presence of ethical AI standards as suggested by Jobin et al. (2019) and tailored the operational definitions to suit the corporate AI practices context. Well-being was operationally defined as a company's efforts to respect and enhance human dignity and support social good in AI implementation. Sustainability was operationalized as a company's effort to incorporate sustainability goals into AI and deploy energy-efficient and environment-friendly AI technology. Safety included safety standards, risk assessments, and harm prevention mechanisms associated with corporate AI deployment. Privacy involved a company's effort to deploy AI usage with personal data protection regulations and user consent mechanisms. Autonomy was operationalized as the presence of features or mechanisms that prioritize human control and provide human decision-making options. Justice was indicated by bias and discrimination prevention, as well as inclusive algorithm development in corporate AI use. Intelligibility was a company's effort to disclose the use of AI and provide explainable tools about AI operations. Accountability was operationalized as establishing explicit designations of responsibilities to hold the company and its AI developers accountable for the process and outcomes of AI systems/activities. Each company received a score for each ethics category on a binary scale (zero or one). The scores for all ethics categories were summed to calculate a total *ethics score*.

Stakeholders

The codes for stakeholder groups were adapted from previous studies (Güngör, 2020; Kim & Rader, 2010) and included stockholders/investors, customers, communities, government/policymakers, employees, and suppliers. We added partner as a new code because collaborating with research institutions, professional associations, or other companies to jointly develop ethical AI standards represents the current trend (Hagendorff, 2020). In this context, we operationalized the partners category as entities engaged in developing AI ethics through collaboration. A stakeholder group was coded as 1 if it existed and 0 otherwise. For further analysis, each company received a score for each stakeholder group and the scores for all stakeholder groups were combined to calculate a total *stakeholder score* to indicate the level of multi-stakeholder engagement.

Legitimation Cues

Legitimation cues were developed from the concepts of legitimation strategies (Hahn & Lülfs, 2014; Hahn et al., 2021). A symbolic cue was operationally defined as the content of a corporate AI ethics statement that only contains information about goals, visions, and commitments for ethical AI standards without follow-up implementation cases and clear regulation. A substantive cue was operationalized as the content of a corporate AI ethics statement that includes concrete ethical AI implementation or enforcement mechanisms (e.g., ethical AI council/committee or ethical AI framework R&D) for aligning with ethical AI standards. The total *substantive cue score* was derived by summing the substantive cue scores, with each cue addressing an ethical AI standard assigned a value of 1 point. The total *symbolic cue score* was calculated in the same manner.

Coding Process

Coders coded for present (1) or absent (0) for each subcategory of online placements, media formats, stakeholder groups, and ethical AI standards. Legitimation cues were second-level codes categorized under the first-level code, ethical AI standards. Symbolic cues and substantive cues were mutually exclusive. Therefore, when a first-level code was present, the corresponding second-level code (legitimation cues) was coded as either 0 or 1—symbolic cues are coded as 0, and substantive cues as 1. If a first-level code was absent, the corresponding second-level code was coded as 99 to indicate a missing value.

Two independent coders who underwent three rounds of training used the coding schemes to code the statements. To ensure the reliability of the coding schemes, 16 AI ethics statements, representing approximately 15% of the total AI ethics statements, were randomly selected and coded by the two coders. Then, we calculated Cohen's Kappa to examine the intercoder reliabilities for each variable. The reliabilities ranged from 0.79 to 1, except for three items. The Cohen's Kappa reliabilities of these three measures were undefined, as all coded values for this variable were identical, and the coders achieved 100% agreement. The results of the intercoder reliability testing suggested an acceptable agreement between the two coders (Perreault & Leigh, 1989).

Results

Existence of Corporate AI Ethics Statement

To answer RQ1, which asked about the number and proportion of corporate AI ethics statements published by *Fortune* 500 companies and *Forbes* 50 AI companies, a descriptive frequency analysis was conducted. Among the 550 companies reviewed (i.e., *Fortune* 500 companies plus *Forbes* 50 AI companies), 101 companies (18.36%) had established AI ethics statements: 91 of the *Fortune* 500 companies (18.2%) and 10 (20%) of the *Forbes* AI 50 companies.

Ethical AI Standards

In response to RQ2, which asked about the emphasis placed on ethical AI standards by companies, the descriptive frequency analysis showed that among the eight ethical AI standards in the AI ethics statements, intelligibility (n = 89, 88.1%) and safety (n = 89, 88.1%) were the most frequently emphasized, followed by justice (n = 86, 85.1%), privacy (n = 77, 76.2%), and accountability (n = 71%, 70.3%). Standards such as sustainability (n = 27, 26.7%), autonomy (n = 46, 45.5%), and well-being (n = 55, 54.5%) were mentioned less frequently. Overall, companies have relatively high ethics scores (M = 5.35, SD = 1.85), indicating their emphasis on diverse ethical AI standards.

Stakeholders

RQ3 sought to identify which stakeholder group received the most emphasis in corporate AI ethics statements. The descriptive frequency analysis revealed that customers (n = 78, 77.2%) were the most frequently addressed stakeholder group in the statements, followed by employees (n = 50, 49.5%) and government/policymakers (n = 37, 36.6%). Other groups, such as partners (n = 32, 31.7%), community members (n = 16, 15.8%), suppliers (n = 15, 14.9%), and stockholders (n = 5, 5.0%), were addressed less frequently. Overall, the findings reveal a low multi-stakeholder engagement level, with an average stakeholder score of 2.31 (SD = 1.50).

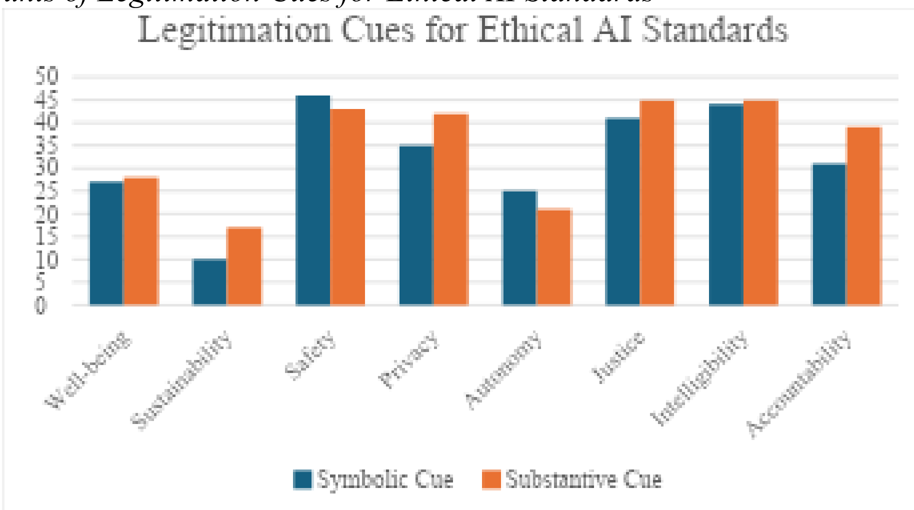
Relationships between Ethical AI Standards and Stakeholders

To answer RQ4, chi-square tests were conducted to analyze the relationships between ethical standards and stakeholders. The results revealed significant associations between certain ethical standards and specific stakeholder groups. For customers, privacy ($\chi^2(1, N = 101) = 3.88$, $p < 0.05$) and intelligibility ($\chi^2(1, N = 101) = 5.74$, $p < 0.05$) were significantly related to their presence in corporate AI ethics statements. For employees, safety ($\chi^2(1, N = 101) = 5.88$, $p < 0.05$), intelligibility ($\chi^2(1, N = 101) = 5.88$, $p < 0.05$), and accountability ($\chi^2(1, N = 101) = 4.47$, $p < 0.05$) showed significant associations.

Legitimation Cues

RQ5 asked about how companies employ different legitimation cues. The descriptive frequency analysis revealed varying patterns in the use of legitimation cues for ethical AI standards (Figure 1). Substantive cues were more prevalent for sustainability (*n* = 17, 63%), accountability (*n* = 39, 55.7%), privacy (*n* = 42, 54.5%), and justice (*n* = 45, 52.3%). In contrast, symbolic cues were more common for autonomy (*n* = 25, 54.3%) and safety (*n* = 46, 51.7%). Well-being (*n* = 28, 50.9%) and intelligibility (*n* = 45, 50.6%) showed nearly equal distribution between substantive and symbolic cues. The overall low total substantive scores (*M* = 2.77, *SD* = 2.97) indicate a limited deployment of these cues across multiple ethical AI standards, although it showed a slightly higher mean than the total symbolic scores (*M* = 2.56, *SD* = 2.81).

Figure 1. *Counts of Legitimation Cues for Ethical AI Standards*



Discussion

As global businesses increasingly focus on AI governance, more companies have communicated their commitment to ethical AI practices through corporate AI ethics statements. This study examined how companies utilize these statements to legitimize their AI initiatives, focusing on ethical AI standards and stakeholders. Ethical AI standards act as benchmarks for achieving moral legitimacy in AI practices, while stakeholders influence the perceived legitimacy of corporate activities. This study also investigated the use of legitimation cues to align corporate practices with stakeholder expectations and ethical AI standards.

The Rise of Corporate AI Ethics Statements

The findings reveal a growing presence of online corporate AI ethics statements over the years. Jobin et al. (2019) identified 19 corporate AI ethics statements, Schiff et al. (2021) documented 26 from 30 countries, and Corrêa (2023) reported 48 statements from 37 countries. This trend indicates a growing emphasis on AI ethics; the increasing deployment of online AI ethics statements as a legitimacy approach signals these efforts to stakeholders (McKinney et al., 2010). These developments align with calls to enhance the accessibility of ethics statements through effective channels (Ki & Kim, 2010).

Ethical AI Standards in Corporate AI Ethics Statements

This study also examined how companies' AI ethics statements align with widely recognized ethical AI standards, revealing that intelligibility, safety, justice, privacy, and accountability are the most frequently emphasized. These findings are similar to those of the previous reviews of AI ethics documents across various types of organizations conducted by Corrêa et al. (2023), Hagendorff (2020), and Jobin (2019). This consistency indicates that corporate AI ethics statements often draw upon universal guidelines issued by governments, academic institutions, and professional associations, such as OECD's Recommendation of the Council on Artificial Intelligence and the High-Level Expert Group on AI Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI (Corrêa et al., 2023; Floridi & Cowls, 2021).

A notable difference between the current findings and those of Corrêa et al. (2023) is the lesser emphasis on autonomy observed in this study. For intelligibility, companies commit to transparency in explaining when and how AI makes decisions that affect users, aiming to enhance the interpretability of these decisions. AI transparency fosters trust in AI, which translates into improved relational satisfaction with the parent company (Park & Yoon, 2024). This emphasis on intelligibility is likely driven by its role in building trust. Similarly, safety and privacy concerns are critical to trust in AI, particularly in algorithms and automation technologies, making them essential factors that companies must address to foster user confidence and acceptance (Dorotic et al., 2024).

Stakeholder Management through Corporate AI Ethics Statements

Stakeholders rely on heuristics to assess AI ethicality in areas such as justice, accountability, and privacy (Shin, 2020). By highlighting these principles in AI ethics statements, companies can leverage heuristic cues to build stakeholders' trust (Liao & Sundar, 2022). This study recommends that companies reference multiple standards but strategically emphasize key principles—such as intelligibility, safety, and privacy—that are most closely linked to fostering trust in AI.

This study examined how companies address stakeholder salience in AI ethics statements to manage expectations regarding ethical AI deployment. The findings reveal that companies navigate diverse stakeholder needs by explicitly referencing their concerns in AI ethics statements (Stevens et al., 2005). Scholars have emphasized the importance of addressing multiple stakeholder expectations in corporate AI practices to create value for all stakeholders (Güngör, 2020). Stakeholder theory highlights the need for companies to analyze stakeholder salience strategically, prioritize powerful stakeholders, and allocate greater communication and engagement efforts toward them (Kim & Rader, 2010; Mitchell et al., 1997).

The results of this study show that customers were the most frequently addressed stakeholders, followed by employees, governments, and partners. Stockholders/investors were the least-mentioned group. AI ethics statements targeting customers frequently focused on respecting and protecting their rights and empowering them. For employees, the emphasis was on ensuring security, enhancing efficiency, and providing training. Government agencies and policymakers were addressed in terms of compliance with AI ethics statements. These findings contrast with patterns observed in corporate websites and CSR reports. For example, Kim et al. (2010) found that *Fortune* 500 companies prioritized stockholder needs on their websites, followed by customers and communities. In the transparency reports of information and communications technology (ICT) companies, consumers and governments were the most frequently addressed stakeholders (Reid et al., 2024).

These differences may be explained by the specific context of AI ethics. For ICT companies, customer data protection and policy compliance are priorities. However, in AI ethics deployment, where legislation and regulation are still evolving, governments receive less attention. At the broader corporate governance level, stockholders often hold the most power (Kim et al., 2010), but AI deployment is execution-focused, emphasizing direct users such as customers and employees. Trust in AI adoption by consumers and employees drives AI technology development, and addressing ethical issues plays a critical role in fostering this trust

(Du & Xie, 2021). Consequently, AI ethics statements tend to prioritize these primary stakeholder groups.

Companies should adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to align AI ethics deployment with diverse stakeholder expectations: identify primary users of AI tools and those most impacted by AI practices, classify them as primary stakeholders, and prioritize them with tailored communication and engagement efforts. They should also strategically communicate the ethical AI standards that are most relevant to their primary stakeholders' concerns to align with their expectations. For instance, customers are particularly concerned with privacy and intelligibility, while employees prioritize safety, intelligibility, and accountability.

Legitimation Strategies in Corporate AI Ethics Statements

Another focus of this study was how companies deploy legitimation strategies in their AI ethics statements to meet stakeholder expectations and align with ethical AI standards. Specifically, the use of symbolic versus substantive cues was examined, distinguishing between commitments for impression management and actions reflecting tangible changes (Eng et al., 2024; Hahn et al., 2021). Companies showcased substantive cues through examples such as AI R&D projects, AI ethics councils/committees, and governance frameworks. Notable initiatives included Microsoft's Fairlearn (addressing fairness) and IBM AI's Explainability 360 (enhancing intelligibility). While some scholars argue that ethics statements often rely on symbolic legitimation (Hagendorf, 2020), this study found evidence of substantive actions, such as the establishment of structured AI ethics committees by companies like Panasonic and Samsung that incorporate clear processes and accountability mechanisms.

Despite these efforts, however, public skepticism about "ethics washing" persists (Bowen, 2024). To counter this perception, companies must enhance communication transparency by detailing mechanisms, progress, and enforcement actions (Eng et al., 2024). This study recommends incorporating concrete examples and detailed enforcement in AI ethics statements, particularly for standards most valued by primary stakeholders, such as intelligibility, privacy, safety, and accountability.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several future research agendas suggested by this study. First, the focus of this research was corporate AI ethics statements from *Fortune* Global 500 and *Forbes* AI 50 companies, limiting the generalizability of the findings to small-sized enterprises and non-profits. Future researchers could broaden the scope to establish a more comprehensive understanding. Second, this study employed quantitative content analysis with a deductive approach by starting with pre-defined coding schemes, but this approach may have limitations in capturing evolving ethical AI standards that lack uniformity. Future researchers could address this gap by using qualitative methods such as interviews to explore emerging AI standards and identify new stakeholder groups. Lastly, the study did not evaluate the extent to which corporate AI ethics statements influence stakeholder perceptions. A future study could examine whether these statements effectively enhance stakeholders' acceptance of corporate AI practices.

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