“Posts are my own”: Effects of Social Media Disclaimers on Perceptions of Employees and Their Organizations from Tweets and Retweets

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Abstract

Purpose – This study empirically assesses the perceptions the public has of employees and their organization following a [re]tweet, and the additional potential ameliorating effect of a disclaimer distancing the organization from the individual employee’s social media presence.

Design/method/approach – A fully-crossed 2 (disclaimer v. no disclaimer) × 2 (positive v. negative valence post) × 2 (post v. retweet) experiment exposed participants (N = 173) to an employee’s personal tweet. Resultant perceptions of both the poster (i.e., goodwill) and the poster’s organization (i.e., organizational reputation) were analyzed using planned contrast analyses.

Findings – Findings reveal audiences form impressions of individuals based on both tweeted and retweeted content. Perceptions of both the poster’s goodwill and the poster’s organization were commensurate with the valence of the poster’s tweets, stronger when posts were original tweets rather than retweets, and there was a significant interaction effect between valence and [re]tweet. Disclaimers did not significantly affect perceptions, suggesting employers may be better-served by asking employees to omit reference to their employer on their personal social media accounts.

Originality/value – This research contributes to understanding how employee and organizational reputations are affected by employees’ personal social media content. Results suggest even when a disclaimer explicitly seeks to distance the employee from the organization, audiences still see the employee as informal brand ambassadors of their organization.

Keywords – Twitter, Impression formation, Organizational attitudes, Disclaimers, Schema tuning; Reputation

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"Posts are my own": Effects of Social Media Content Disclaimers on Perceptions of Employees and Their Organizations from Tweets and Retweets

Flying from New York to South Africa to visit family for the holidays, a 30-year-old director of corporate communication tweeted during her London layover: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!" Her employer had fired her by the time she returned home, seeking to distance itself from the poster and racist tweet. (Ronson, 2015). Actress Gina Carano was fired from *The Mandalorian* and dropped by her agency not as a result of her own authored posts; but after she retweeted alt-right content about the Covid-19 pandemic and conspiracy theories, contrary to the stated values of her employer and agency (Sarkisan, 2021). These examples illustrate the risks social media use entails for employers as employees are perceived to speak for them (Cooren, 2020, Dreher, 2014). Corporate efforts to manage reputation and relationships with publics increasingly extend to employees' online communications (Kim and Rhee, 2011, Lee and Kim, 2021), even for employees not explicitly a part of the corporate communication team (Andersson, 2019). Further, recent trade research suggests nearly 85% of employers would fire employees for inappropriate personal social media posts (Global Newswire, 2023).

In response to increasing concerns over personal and professional consequences of the messages social media users broadcast and rebroadcast, disclaimer statements such as, "Views are my own. RTs ≠ endorsements," are now becoming common recommendations for human resources social media policies (e.g., Helter, 2022, Workable, 2016) as a way to dissociate the employer from content posted by employee. Such disclaimers are also an oft-suggested public relations impression management practice (e.g., Miller-Merrell, 2013, Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck, 2014) to insulate organizations from reputation damage caused by employee social media activity. Though such disclaimers lack legal standing (Kamath, 2013), the actual *efficacy* of such disclaimers—particularly when considering both first-authored messages and others' rebroadcast messages—remains understudied. Scholarship has not answered whether disclaimers serve their intended function of distancing the employee from the content of retweets and the employing organization from the employee's social media presence. Questions also remain regarding the overall impression formation effects of an employee's social media content, whether it originated from the employee or was rebroadcast from others, on perceptions of both the employee and their organization. Filling this gap is important for corporate communications scholarship and practice as the public increasingly calls out bad social media behavior and links that behavior to an offender's employer. Social media increasingly make individual employees' personal communication public, visible, and their association with their employer explicit.

To answer these questions, this work first applies the psychological concept of schema and the communicative process of impression formation to examine individual impressions formed based on social media content, and then explores how these extend to perceptions of reputation for identified employing organizations. Next, we report an experimental study empirically assessing: (1) how publics form impressions of an employee from their positive and negative media posts and reposts, (2) whether those impressions affect organizational

reputation, and finally (3) how social media disclaimers might attenuate those impressions. Findings are discussed with respect to both employee and organizational reputation, and include both scholarly and practical implications.

Online Impression Formation

Online, communicators often are unable to access the cues which are innately *given off* in face-to-face context: Others' clothing, demeanors, proxemics, and other nonverbal cues are limited. Communicators online thus tend to rely on the cues *given* more deliberatively and purposefully to form initial impressions of others (Ellison et al., 2006, Goffman, 1959), and attend carefully to the limited available cues given (Carr and Stefaniak, 2012, Ellison et al., 2006). These subtle cues help form impressions of others by guiding initial schema about individuals online, particularly a zero-acquaintance target (e.g., Cummings and Dennis, 2018, Qiu et al., 2012).

Schema and Schema Tuning

Schema refer to the cognitive structures, formed by broad expectations and understandings of our reality, that guide and structure our information processing (Rumelhart, 1980) and subsequent impression formation. Cognitive schema help individuals, "understand and process novel stimuli by tapping into their existing storehouse of knowledge, or schemas" (Tang et al., 2020, p. 3). By assessing cues targets provide and mapping those cues onto prior knowledge of similar cues, schema allow individuals to form initial impressions of targets, even from minimal information. Cues perceived as undesirable thus can foster negative schema and impressions of the target individual; whereas cues perceived as favorable can foster positive schemas and impressions of the target individuals (Sunnafrank, 1986).

Schema tuning is the process whereby individuals adjust their mental representations of their interactional partners over time, particularly as new stimuli are received and assimilated into existing mental schema about their partners (Rumelhart and Norman, 1978). When individuals identify or perceive inconsistencies with the disparate information available about their communication partners, they seek to resolve this discrepancy by adjusting their schema and understanding of the target. For example, inconsistencies between initial nonverbal cues (e.g., wearing a branded work shirt and smiling) and subsequent verbal cues (e.g., "I hate my job and my coworkers suck!!") can result in schema tuning as perceivers alter their schema to make sense of the inconsistencies and form revised mental representations of their communication partners (Tang et al., 2020).

Applying Schema Tuning in Social Media

Initial Schema from Profiles. Within social media, the development of initial schema often occurs through profiles or bios. Profiles are unique pages in which users articulate their identities—often through self-disclosing interests, hobbies, and other individuating information (Lampe et al., 2007)—and are critical and defining elements of social network sites (Ellison and boyd, 2013). Social media profiles are frequently points of initial impression formation, as users give off cues they believe are salient to the self they seek to portray (Ellison et al., 2012, Sundén, 2003). As such, social media profiles substantively inform initial schema and impressions of a target individual, as users carefully attend to the available profile cues including profile images (Westerman et al., 2015), networked connections (e.g., Friends; Utz,

2010), and self-generated text (Pelled et al., 2017). These profiles thus foster initial observers' initial schema—impressions—of the social media user.

Schema Tuning. Subsequent information via social media (e.g., a post, an [un]flattering picture) can then result in a perceiver's schema tuning, as they incorporate the new information into their schema of the target. An individual's own statements can online affect others' perceptions of that individual (e.g., Van Der Heide et al., 2012, Walther et al., 2009), typically consistent with the nature of that statement, as they tune their schema to incorporate this new information. Moreover, numerous social media now additionally enable users to repost, reblog, Share, or otherwise propagate a message they did not directly generate. It is particularly unclear in the literature whether or to what degree statements merely reposted by a user—not initially authored by them—affect the process of schema tuning and subsequent perceptions of the individual. Addressing this research gap, the present work first explores how both creating original posts and reposting others affect receivers' perceptions of a user, before later extending that exploration to the employer. Specifically, we contextualize our questions within Twitter, a heavily-used contemporary social medium (Auxier and Anderson, 2021) that allows individuals to post both messages they have directly authored (i.e., tweets) as well as to rebroadcast messages authored by others (i.e., retweets).

Schema Tuning from Tweets. Relative to the small effects of profile contents (see Pelled et al., 2017, Utz, 2010, Westerman et al., 2015), users' self-generated messages exert larger effects on subsequent perceptions of a target (Batenburg and Bartels, 2017, Carr and Walther, 2014, Walther et al., 2009). How perceivers tune schema is substantively influenced by the valence of those self-generated messages, as user-generated messages strongly influences interpersonal impressions of the target, consistent with the *halo effect*: People saying good or positive things are viewed more favorably and positively than people making negatively-valenced statements (Asch, 1946). For example, Carr and Walther (2014) found employers perceive applicants as more employable and professionally capable after being shown positive self-referential claims online than when shown equitable negative self-referential statements. And, Edwards and Harris (2016) found that a user's own comments about another user /influenced the interpersonal impressions formed of the poster: Positively-valenced posts led to more positive perceptions of the poster's goodwill, character, caring, and social attractiveness. We likewise expect negatively-valenced self-authored content results in lower evaluations of the target, whereas positively-valenced content results in higher evaluations of the target. Formally:

> ***H1:*** *Social media content from a poster affect audiences' perceptions of the poster, commensurate with the valence of the content.*

Schema Tuning from Retweets. The first hypothesis focuses on the impression formation value of social media posts authored and posted by a user. However, nearly 50 percent of Twitter posts are *retweets* (McClain et al., 2021): Twitter messages rebroadcast or sent along from other users, "either wholesale or with additional comment" (Molyneux, 2015, p. 921). Though users can retweet themselves, herein we conceptualize retweets as rebroadcasts of others' messages by an individual Twitter user. This research considers whether rebroadcasting others' messages results schema tuning similar to that stemming from exposure to users' own statements.

Retweets are a user's curation of content they believe would interest their audience. Past research reveals motivations for retweeting, including retweeting to diffuse a message to new audiences, inform or amuse one's network, validate others' thoughts, and publicly agreeing with the retweeted post (boyd et al., 2010). While users have goals beyond self-presentation, publics may still view a retweeted message as an artifact of one's own self and views, affecting the audience's impressions of the retweeter accordingly (Hogan, 2010). This view has received some empirical support: Lee and Sundar (2013) found tweets from health experts did not affect perceptions of experts' credibility, which appeared to be derived from their established authority. However, retweets of health messages by lay people resulted in the enhancement of the layperson's credibility. As retweets (without added commentary) represent curated artifacts less closely tied to self-presentation (Hogan, 2010), retweets can lead to subtle schema tuning regarding the person who shares another's message when audiences do not have an extant schema of the retweeter. Formally:

H2: *Retweets affect perceptions of a poster, commensurate with the valence of the content.*

Relative Effect of Tweets and Retweets. Finally, though self-authored and rebroadcast social media content are both hypothesized to affect perceivers' schema tuning, tweets should have a stronger effect on schema tuning than retweets. Whereas tweets represent direct claims users provide to show their selves to their network ties, retweets are curated data reflective of Hogan's (2010) artifacts, serving to give off (rather than give) information to perceivers. Consistent with Hogan's theorizing that performances are more direct manifestations of an individual's self than more abstract and indirect artifacts, it should follow that self-authored content (i.e., tweets) are more influential in perceivers' schema tuning than artifacts authored by others (i.e., retweets). Thus:

H3: *Tweets affect perceptions of a poster more than retweets.*

The first three hypotheses focus on how publics form impressions of a target individual, guided by that individual's [re]tweets. However, as illustrated in the opening anecdotes, perception of an individual may also have implications for the reputation of that individual's employing organization, as employees can be considered ambassadors for organizations regardless of role. We thus also consider how impressions of the individual further affect the reputation of the individual's employing organization.

How Employees' Messages Affect Others' Perceptions of the Organization

Employees can be perceived of as organizational ambassadors, whether they are employed in a communication role or not (Andersson, 2019), and organizational publics' (e.g., customers, stakeholders) perceptions of organizational representatives (employees, brand ambassadors) impact stakeholders' perceptions of the organization (e.g., van Zoonen et al., 2018, Opitz et al., 2018). Wall and Berry (2007) identified *humanic clues*, "the behavior of service employees, including body language, tone of voice, and level of enthusiasm" (p. 60) as critical components of customers' perceptions of business in offline contexts. In other words, a clean and well-decorated restaurant (mechanic clues) with well-prepared cuisine (functional clues) may still be perceived poorly by customers after encountering a surly *maître d'* or

unpleasant waitstaff (humanic clues). In short, the attitudes and personalities of employees are taken as emblematic of the larger organization.

Humanic clues were initially limited to in-person observations or direct communication, but the growth of social media has made organizational members' professional and personal disclosures more available to stakeholders, and their influence on the publics' perceptions of the organization just as consequential (Ivens and Schaarschmidt, 2015, Lee and Tao, 2020). When individuals explicitly communicate on behalf of their organization, their statements affect organizational perceptions (van Zoonen et al., 2018), including *organizational reputation*. Organizational reputation, "…an attitude based on how well an organization does or does not meet certain criteria or expectations stakeholders have for organizations" (Coombs, 2010, p. 58), can be created through brief, mediated interactions. Organizations have begun to view employees as brand ambassadors on social media as a result (Andersson, 2019), even if infomally so.

Even when encountering someone not speaking as an *official* brand ambassador, individuals hold more positive views of an organization and are more likely to engage with that organization on social media (i.e., Like, Share, and comment) after being exposed to employees' positive (rather than negative) work-related social media posts (Lee et al., 2021). Consistent with their offline analogue, we expect employees' social media disclosures serve as humanic clues, helping form reputational perceptions of the individual which are then further overlaid onto the individual's organization. This expectation guides our prediction regarding the effect of employees' postings on perceptions of their employer.

> ***H4****: An employees' (a) tweets and (b) retweets affect reputational perceptions of the employee's organization.*

Profile Disclaimers

Finally, the present work explores the perceptual effect of individuals' disclaimers about their online presence, both on schema regarding the individual as well as schema of the individual's employing organization. Practitioners (e.g., Miller-Merrell, 2013, Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck, 2014) and organizations (Martinez, 2020) alike contend disclaimers intended to disassociate messages posted from subsequent perceptions matter. Profile disclaimers like, "Retweets ≠ Endorsements" or "Views are my own and do not reflect those of my employer," therefore often appear in users' profiles. However, a critical question is whether such disclaimers achieve their goal of attenuating the impression formation value of posted messages for both individuals and their employers, potentially protecting organizations from negative perceptions generated by questionable social media content.

Retweets ≠ Endorsements; Opinions Are My Own

Many profile disclaimers seek to distance the user from the content of messages they did not directly author. Whereas a poster has great control and knowledge over the content they personally generate, they have less control over and familiarity with the content posted by others. For example, a user retweeting an interesting photo originally posted by a source who is subsequently found to be problematic may want to denote sharing the photo should not imply condoning the behavior or attitudes of the source. Alternately, a user reposting a message meant to be sarcastic or disingenuous (i.e., 'shitposting') may find other viewers unable to find the

same humor or insight in the reposted message. In such cases, disclaimers may be proactive personal mitigation against backlash tied with reposting content from dubious, disingenuous, or unknown others.

Another potential function for the disclaimers is to help disassociate a user's personal and professional identities, denoting their social media content may not reflect the views or behaviors of their employers. As social media can blur lines between personal and professional identities (Davis and Jurgenson, 2014), individuals may use disclaimers to distance their social media statements from their affiliated organizations. An additional motivation for such disclaimers may be employees' concerns of *ventriloquism*, a process by which an individual is are considered ambassadors, perceived to speak for their organizations even if they are not authorized or recognized spokespersons (Cooren, 2020). Concerned others may mistake their casual social media musings for official organizational dogma or policy, users may include disclaimers to distance their organizational and personal persona (Andersson, 2019).

Effects of Profile Disclaimers

The legal efficacy of social media disclaimers remains dubious (Kamath, 2013); and yet they are increasingly suggested—if not required by employers' social media policies—in practice (e.g., Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck, 2014). However, whether disclaimers fulfill their intended purpose of distancing a poster and/or their organization from direct and rebroadcast content has not yet been assessed. It may be disclaimers work as intended, mitigating the self-presentational effects of a retweet as-intended. Alternately, such disclaimers may simply be ignored or dismissed, with any retweets still considered artifacts of one's intended self, just as original content would be. The lack of prior research into the effectiveness of disclaimers guides a research question:

> ***RQ1:*** *Are profile disclaimers effective at mitigating the effects of an individual's social media content on perceptions of (a) the individual and (b) the individual's organization?*

Method

Procedure

An experiment was an appropriate means of testing hypotheses and answering the research question, as the design allows for control over independent variables (i.e., valence of message, original or retweeted message, and presence of a disclaimer in the profile) to observe the effect on the dependent variables (i.e., personal and organizational perceptions), affording the ability to establish causality (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000). After consenting to participate in an online experiment, participants were randomly presented a Twitter profile that either included or omitted a disclaimer, and then randomly exposed to one message by the same user. Tweets were either positively or negatively valenced, and either posted directly by the user or retweeted without additional commentary from another account. Thus, the experiment was a fully-crossed 2 (profile: disclaimer v. no disclaimer) × 2 (valence: positive v. negative) × 2 (post: tweet v. retweet) design. Afterwards, participants completed several standardized scales to self-report perceptions of the Twitter user and their organization. All profiles and tweets were presented as static images, helping to (a) integrate stimuli tweets into the survey engine, and (b) reduce

participants' ability to follow active hyperlinks and obtain information beyond the scope of the study.

Experimental Stimuli

Stimuli Development and Pretesting

Profiles and messages were developed with the assistance of a pretest ($N_{pretest}$ = 24) drawn from a similar sample as the main study. Participants were first asked to use Coombs and Holladay's (2002) 5-item organizational reputation scale to provide their perceptions of ten large (i.e., over 1,000 employees) organizations across multiple industries. Among the pretested organization, General Dynamics's ($M_{pretest}$ = 3.93, $SD_{pretest}$ = .59) reputation was perceived as neutral or unbiased, nondifferent from the scale midpoint (i.e., 4), $t(23) = -.49$, $p = .63$. Thus, General Dynamics, a large company of over 100,000 employees and with revenue in excess of US$36B (General Dynamics, 2019), was the target organization for this study.

As use of single messages can introduce message effects limiting generalizability of findings (see Jackson, 1992), the pretest also presented respondents thirteen statements drawn from prior research into employer sentiment of job applicant social media posts (Carr and Walther, 2014) and modeled after actual tweets.[1] Participants were asked to evaluate the unspecified author of each message using the six-item caring/goodwill factor of McCroskey and Richmond's (1989, 1999) general attitude scale. Three message-pairs that significantly differed ($p < .001$, see Appendix A), were selected to be used in the present study, reflecting three pairs of sentiments with minor verbiage alterations used to manipulate the valence of the message. Message valence was thus ascribed based on the positivity/negativity results of the pretest. Positively valenced posts espoused notions of hard work and self-care; whereas negatively-valenced posts addressed a poor work ethic and self-neglect. All messages were then inserted into a Twitter template as either an original tweet or as a retweet without additional comment.

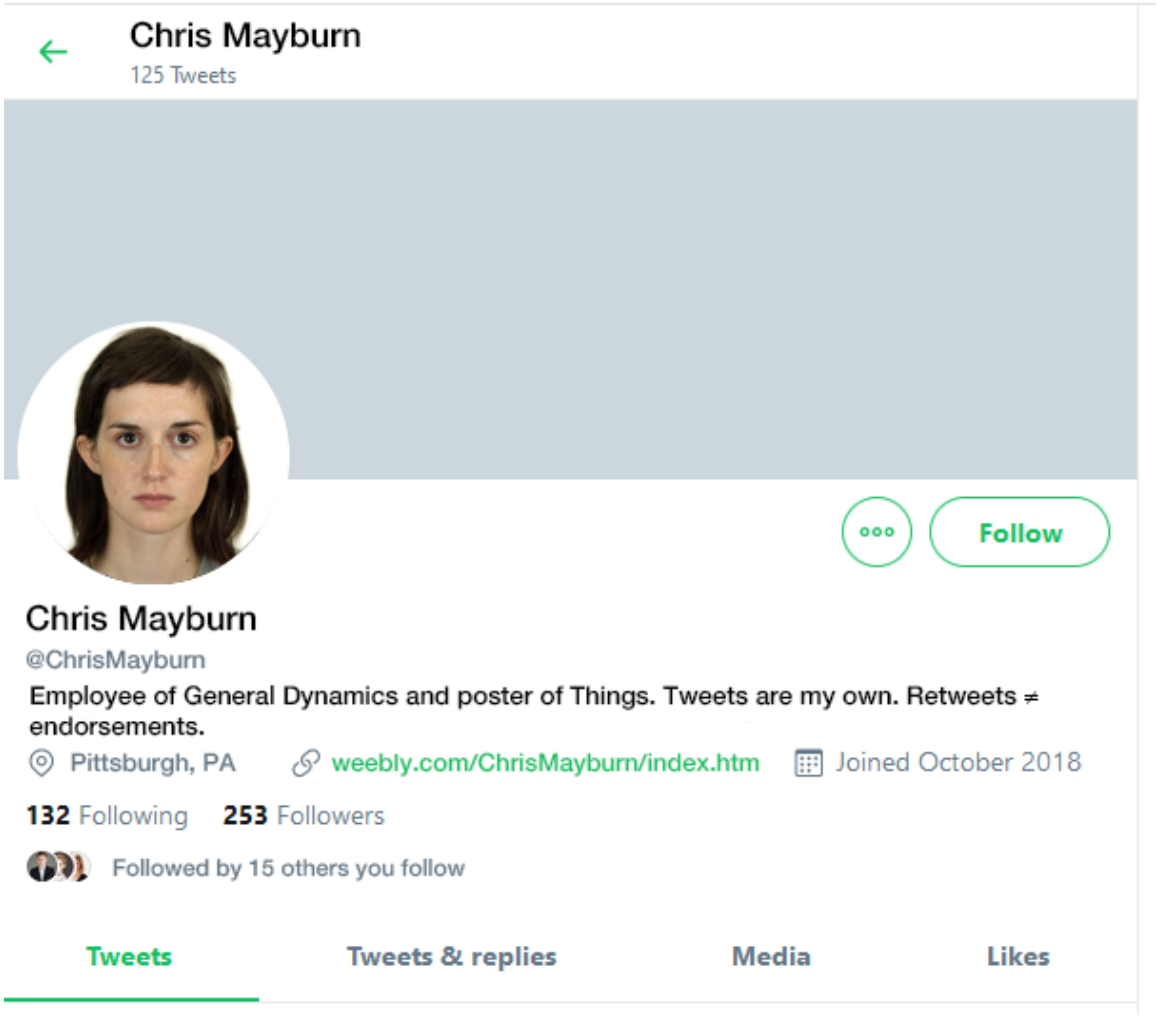
Finally, to control for potentially spurious effects of the physical characteristics presented by the target, profile photographs were selected from the Chicago Face Database (CFD; chicagofaces.com), which previously assessed the physical attractiveness of numerous headshots (Ma et al., 2015). Two Caucasian females of average and nondifferent physical attractiveness were used as the profile photo in the tweet and the profile photo of the person being retweeted, respectively.

Profile Stimuli

Profiles. Participants initially viewed a static profile of "Chris Mayburn" (see Figure 1). The profile indicated hobbies, interests, and signaled the person was employed by General Dynamics. Given participants could not have previous knowledge of the "Chris Mayburn" used in the study, and the neutral prior attitude about the General Dynamics organization, any perceptions about the poster and General Dynamics in this study can be attributed to the stimuli rather than *a priori* attitudes about either the individual or the organization.

Figure 1

Sample Profile Stimulus Twitter Profile, Showing Disclaimers Manipulation



Manipulation of Profile Disclaimers. The disclaimer condition was manipulated by either including or omitting a disclaimer from the end of Chris Mayburn's profile self-description. In the *disclaimer* condition, after identifying hobbies, interest, and workplace, the profile additionally read, "Opinions are my own, Retweets ≠ endorsements" disclaimer. In the *no disclaimer* condition, this statement did not appear.

Posts. After viewing the profile, participants were separately exposed to a post made by the user whose profile they had just observed. All posts took the form of Twitter [re]tweets, to maximize the external validity of the stimuli. Twitter posts were experimentally manipulated to vary the valence and initial authorship of posts.

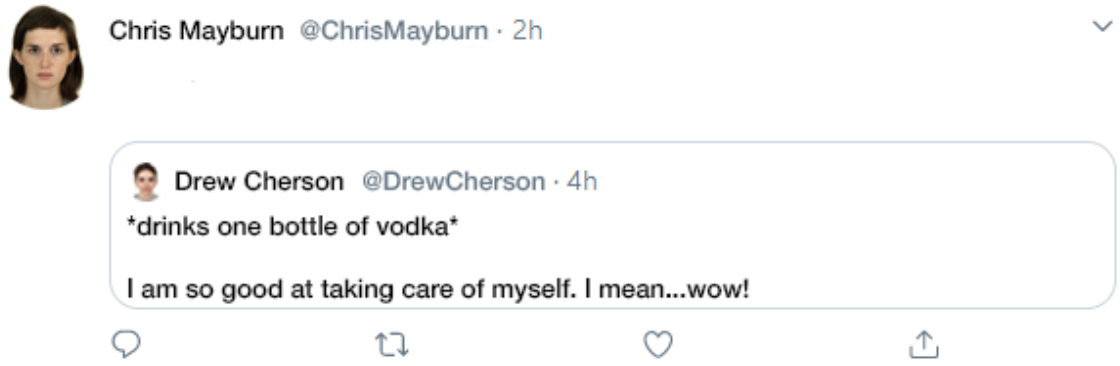
Manipulation of Message Valence. Stimuli were manipulated to either present positively- or negatively-valenced message content. *Positively-valenced* tweets included, "What you lack in talent can be made up for with desire, hustle, and giving 110% all the time," "drinks one bottle of water. I am so good at taking care of myself," and, "I don't get it. How can a hard-working professional individual such as myself bungle a work project so badly???"[2] *Negatively-valenced* tweets included, "What you lack in talent can be made up for with lying, cheating, and

finding someone rich to mooch off of," "drinks one bottle of vodka. I am so good at taking care of myself," and, "I don't get it. How can a hard-working professional individual such as my teammate bungle a work project so badly???" To minimize message effects tied to a specific message (see Jackson, 1992), messages were collapsed into either positive- or negatively-valenced categories for analysis.

Manipulation of [Re]Tweets. Stimuli were also manipulated to reflect either a post authored directly by the target (i.e., Chris Mayburn) or a post authored by another user and reposted by Chris Mayburn. In the *tweet* conditions, messages were authored and tweeted directly by the target, Chris Mayburn. In the *retweet* conditions, messages initially authored by another fabricated user (i.e., Drew Cherson) were retweeted by Chris Mayburn without comment (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Sample Stimulus Tweet, Showing Negative Retweet Manipulation



Participants

One hundred ninety-nine individuals were drawn from the participant pool at a large, Midwestern university and completed the study. Twenty-five individuals failed one of four basic attention checks and were subsequently removed, resulting in a final $N = 173$ for the study. Participants self-reported their gender ($n_{female} = 114$, 66.3%; $n_{male} = 57$, 33.1%, $n_{Preferred\ not\ to\ answer} = 1$, .6%), and an average age of 20.53 ($SD = 4.24$, range: 17-57) years. The sample was somewhat diverse, 75% of participants were White ($n = 130$), 2.9% were Black ($n = 5$), 1.2% were American Indian or Alaska Native ($n = 2$), 13.3% were Asian ($n = 23$), and the remainder self-reported other ethnic groupings (e.g., Latino, Arab) or were multiracial ($n = 7$). About half of participants were employed part or full time ($n = 86$). Participants received course (extra) credit for participating, commensurate with the policies of the research pool.

Measures

Dependent variables were operationalized using established and validated scales.

Individual Perceptions

To capture *perceptions of an individual* the present work employs *goodwill*: An individual's perceived caring about the receiver (McCroskey, 1992), comprised of the elements of understanding, empathy, and responsiveness (McCroskey and Teven, 1999). Goodwill was selected as the dependent variable for three reasons. First, conceptually, goodwill has been identified as a critical construct in human interaction (McCroskey and Teven, 1999, Beattie et

al., 2020), fundamental to initial impressions as well as relational development and maintenance: People typically like and want to interact with others when those others are perceived to have their best interests at heart. Second, pragmatically, operationalizing interpersonal perceptions via goodwill is consistent with recent similar studies into impression formation via Twitter (e.g., Edwards and Harris, 2016, Khan et al., 2021, Vareberg et al., 2020, Meinert et al., 2019), enabling future meta-analyses. Finally, functionally, goodwill is particularly germane in the study of organizations and organizational members, as employees' goodwill can be a large component of stakeholder's perceptions of an organization and willingness to engage with that organization (Lin and Spence, 2019, McCroskey et al., 2005): Employees with goodwill suggest organizational caring, too.

Perceptions of the individual, Chris Mayburn, were thus operationalized using the 6-item caring/goodwill factor of McCroskey and Teven's (1999) credibility scale. Participants provided perceptions of Chris Mayburn using 7-point semantic differential items, with endpoint pairs including, "Insensitive|Sensitive," and "Self-centered|Not self-centered." Items were recoded so that higher values indicated participants perceived the target individual more favorably. The scale was reliable, $\alpha = .81$.

Organizational Perceptions

At the organizational level, *organizational reputation* is an important construct in brand and identity management, reflecting the perceptions of how well the organization meets the needs of its relevant publics (Coombs, 2010, Lee et al., 2021). Organizational reputation was operationalized using Coombs and Holladay's (2002) 5-item organizational reputation scale. Participants responded to items including, "General Dynamics is concerned with the well-being of its publics," and "Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what General Dynamics says," using a 7-point Likert-type scale, so that higher values indicated participants perceived the target organization as more reputable. The scale was reliable, $\alpha = .81$.

Results

The first hypothesis predicts the contents of Twitter users' direct tweets affect perceptions of the poster, consistent with the valence of the tweet's content. Given the *a priori* patterns in the data predicted by the hypothesis, contrast analysis—focused, directional analysis of variance—was an appropriate analytical approach (Rosenthal and Rosnow, 1985) Contrast analysis allows testing of specific patterns of differences among categorical groups, such as the conditions specified by the independent variables. Initial contrast weights were assigned to conditions to reflect the predicted pattern of differences: +2 to positively-valenced tweet conditions and -2 to negatively-valenced tweet conditions (see Table 1). The contrast analysis revealed significant pattern of differences in interpersonal perceptions as-hypothesized, $t(165) = 4.10$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed), $r_{contrast} = .45$. Participants viewing a positively-valenced tweet had more positive personal impressions (i.e., goodwill) of Chris Mayburn ($n = 63$, $M = 3.46$, $SD = .96$) than participants viewing a negatively-valenced tweet ($n = 58$, $M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.11$), $t(119) = -4.36$, $p < .001$, $d = .79$ (two-tailed). These results support H1, indicating the valence of user's self-generated content affected participants' interpersonal perceptions of that user, consistent with the valence of the user's social media post.

Table 1

Condition Descriptives, Contrast Analyses Weights, and Contrast Test Results

Condition	*Profile*	No Disclaimers				Disclaimers					
	Valence	Positive		Negative		Positive		Negative			
	[Re]Tweet	Tweet	Retweet	Tweet	Retweet	Tweet	Retweet	Tweet	Retweet	$t(165)$	$r_{contrast}$
H1 – Tweet Valence		+2	0	-2	0	+2	0	-2	0	4.10‡	0.45
H2 – Retweet Valence		0	+1	0	-1	0	+1	0	-1	2.49†	0.19
H3 – Tweet v. Retweet		+2	+1	-2	-1	+2	+1	-2	-1	3.75‡	0.42
H4 – Org. Perceptions		+2	+1	-2	-1	+2	+1	-2	-1	2.41†	0.29
RQ – Disclaimers work		+4	+2	-4	-2	+2	+1	-2	-1	*	
Goodwill *Mean*		3.33	3.52	2.56	3.05	3.61	3.71	2.71	3.64		
Goodwill *SD*		0.95	1.37	1.18	1.27	0.96	1.26	1.07	1.21		
Org. Rep *Mean*		4.32	4.22	4.26	3.89	4.36	4.36	4.01	3.62		
Org. Rep *SD*		0.82	0.71	0.94	0.54	0.84	0.94	0.91	0.89		
n		33	13	27	15	30	15	31	9		

Note: † $p < .01$ (one-tailed); ‡$p < .001$ (one-tailed); *Did not significantly differ from results of H2 or H3 test.

The second hypothesis predicts the contents of Twitter users' retweets affects perceptions of the poster, consistent with the valence of the retweeted content. Contrast weights were assigned to conditions to reflect the predicted pattern of differences: +1 to positively-valenced retweet conditions and -1 to negatively-valenced retweet conditions. Again, patterns of differences in interpersonal perceptions were consistent with the hypothesis, $t(165) = 2.49$, $p = .007$ (one-tailed), $r_{contrast} = .19$. Participants viewing positively-valenced retweets perceived Chris Mayburn as possessing greater goodwill ($n = 28$, $M = 4.00$, $SD = .98$) than when viewing negatively-valenced retweets ($n = 24$, $M = 3.43$, $SD = .92$), $t(50) = 2.17$, $p = .04$, $d = .61$. (two-tailed), supporting H2.

The third hypothesis predicts perceptions of an individual are affected more by tweets than retweets. Contrast analysis was again employed to test H3, collapsing the contrast weights of the prior two tests, so that the absolute value of the contrast weight was consistent with the expected relative effect of the [re]tweet and the sign of the contrast weight was commensurate with the (re)tweet valence. The contrast analysis revealed significant pattern of differences in interpersonal perceptions as-hypothesized, $t(165) = 3.75$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed), $r_{contrast} = .42$. Consistent with H3, tweets resulted in stronger personal perceptual effects than retweets, consistent with the valence of the tweet's content.

The fourth hypothesis predicts tweets and retweets impact organizational reputation commensurate with effects on interpersonal perceptions. Contrast analysis was again employed, using the same contrast weights as H3 to test H4; but using organizational reputation as the dependent variable. Consistent with H4, the contrast analysis again revealed significant pattern of differences in organizational perceptions as-hypothesized, $t(165) = 2.41$, $p = .009$ (one-tailed), $r_{contrast} = .29$. Supporting H4, participants' perceptions of the poster's organization were consistent with participants' perceptions of the poster, and driven by the valence of the poster's social media content: The organization was perceived to have a more favorable reputation when its employee [re]tweeted positively-valenced content than when the employee [re]tweeted negatively-valenced content.

The research question explores whether disclaimers affect the perceptions identified in the prior hypotheses. The research question was initially tested by conducting a contrast analysis building on the contrast weights of H3 and H4, assuming disclaimers mitigate perceptual effects (and thus assigning lower contrast weights to disclaimer conditions; see Table 1). In other words, the statistical effects identified in H3 and H4 were expected to be weaker in conditions where the target individual had a disclaimer in their profile. Contrast tests were significant for both interpersonal perceptions of goodwill, $t(165) = 3.64$, $p < .001$ (one-tailed), $r_{contrast} = .41$, and organizational reputation, $t(165) = 1.90$, $p = .03$ (one-tailed), $r_{contrast} = .23$. Fisher z-tests were subsequently used to determine whether the effect sizes of H2 and H3 were statistically different. The Fisher z-test indicated differences in the patterns of the data

were not driven by the presence of disclaimers, as the size of effects on both interpersonal perceptions of the employee's goodwill ($z = .12$, $p = .90$ [2-tailed]) and organizational reputation ($z = .56$, $p = .23$ [2-tailed]) did not differ when a disclaimer was present in the poster's profile. This finding answers the research question, indicating disclaimers do not work as intended, and their presence did not mitigate the spillover perceptions of the organization stemming from interpersonal perceptions.

Discussion

Much consideration has been given to corporate social media policies, both for those acting as formal and as *ad hoc* ambassadors (Dreher, 2014, Opitz et al., 2018, Stohl et al., 2017). As more individuals use their personal social media to generate and rebroadcast content, important questions remain about the impact of employee posting on the employing organization, and the efficacy of common policies recommending or dictating disclaimers. Does what we rebroadcast from others still affect how we are perceived? And recalling the opening anecdotes, are employers justifiably worried about how they are perceived based on the personal statements of their employees? Are those associations from individual to their organizations as persistent when individuals utilize disclaimers? Within the context of Twitter, this study answers these questions, demonstrating both tweets and retweets have impression formation value for users, as well as for their organizations; and tweets had greater impression formation value than retweets. However, disclaimers seeking to distance users and employers from [re]broadcasted content did not affect public perceptions.

Impression Formation from Tweets and Retweets

This research provides empirical support for schema tuning from tweets and (to a lesser degree) retweets, which influence impressions of the target individual, demonstrating the initial source of a social media post can affect observers' resultant perceptions of the user sharing the message. A poster's original and retweeted content both affect perceptions of the poster and the poster's organizational affiliation; but with weaker effects when the message did not originate from the employee.

It is now almost axiomatic: Participants' mental impressions of a target online are influenced by seemingly small units of content broadcast via social media profiles and posts. A user's post affected participants' perceptions of them (operationalized here as the goodwill toward the poster) commensurate with the valence of the content, just as would occur in offline interactions (Sunnafrank, 1986). Online, where such cues can be very small—from small audiovisual content to single messages—even minute or unintentional cues can affect how others perceive that target (e.g., Carr and Walther, 2014, Ellison et al., 2006). The present study additionally demonstrates these perceptions are useful for schema tuning, as participants adjusted their mental representations of the target poster from the initial schema formed by the Twitter profile to assimilate the new information provided by the [re]tweet.

A more novel extension comes from the finding that retweets exerted a weaker effect on resultant perceptions (of both the poster and subsequent impressions of their employer) than self-authored tweets. In this way, these findings provide some empirical support for Hogan's (2010) supposition regarding the differences between performances and artifacts. Whereas *performances* are direct and explicit behaviors by a communicator (i.e., cues given) to strongly convey impression-forming information, *artifacts* are more static results of past performances (i.e., cues given off) that more indirectly and abstractly (and thus weakly) convey impression-forming information.

When a social media user takes the time to performatively craft, compose, edit, and post a message, that cue given directly evidences the sender's self, providing a higher degree of schema tuning, whereby which perceivers can adjust their impressions accordingly. Alternately, the user merely rebroadcasting others' performances create artifacts whose performances and links to the poster are less certain: Another user's tweet may be rebroadcast to support and emphasize, to mock and jeer, or to simply acknowledge (boyd et al., 2010). Cues given off via a rebroadcast appear to result in schema tuning, but to a lesser degree than from self-authored posts. Future research may further explore how self-constructed and rebroadcast artifacts affect subsequent impression formation, such as by exploring whether retweeted memes, audiovisual content, or other content similarly possess lower impression formation.

Implications for Organizations

As organizations increasingly seek to manage their relationships and reputations, including by controlling their employees' personal social media use (Miles and Mangold, 2014), this study has notable implications. Organizations are right to be concerned about what employees post; but may not be developing effective employee social media policies. Recent findings demonstrate work-related social media posts by employees affect the public's perceptions of an organization (Lee et al., 2021); and the present work extends this impact by further demonstrating individuals' social media content can affect perceptions of their organization even when the message is clearly (or explicitly in the case of disclaimers) posted extraorganizationally. Even in 'personal' spaces, employee voice has bearing on how an organization is viewed by outsiders (Cooren, 2020). As such, organizations may be rightly worried: When a social media user explicates a connection with their employer or organization, that individual's online content can further affect how others perceive that organization. Even as private citizens creating personal content, individuals' statements can serve as a humanic clue, affecting perceptions of the organizations with which they explicitly affiliate.

Humanic clues have been well-established in the management and customer service literature, as employees' conduct have implications for stakeholders' perceptions of the organization (e.g., Ivens and Schaarschmidt, 2015, Lee and Tao, 2020). However, such humanic clues have typically dealt with the employees' conduct while within the role of an employee: A rude bank teller at Big Bank Corporation will result in negative

perceptions of Big Bank. These findings reveal similar effects, even when interacting with organizational members online and beyond physical organization bounds. Offline, one may not be aware a rude stranger is an off-work teller, and thus negative assessments about the individual may not carry over to affect attitudes toward Big Bank Corporation.

Alternately, when online, cues associating individuals with their organizational affiliations are abundant, often offered by the individuals themselves (Piercy and Carr, 2020). When users publicly associate themselves online with their organization, these data indicate users' personal statements influence others' perceptions of their organizations as well as the users, even when communicating on topics unrelated to the organization. In sum, individuals who publicly share an affiliation online may find their self-presentations inexorably linked to their role as an organizational member (Cooren, 2020), even as employees are increasingly uncomfortable as *ad hoc* ambassadors (Dreher, 2014). When there is a tether between the individual and an organization, perceptual spillover *does* occur, and employers are justified in seeking to manage employee presentation online.

Disclaimers Are Not Effective at Distancing Posters from Perceptions

Finally, these data address whether disclaimers serve their intended function; indeed, disclaimers' do not distance an organization from employees' online statements. While many companies are asking or requiring individuals to post disclaimers (Opgenhaffen and Scheerlinck, 2014), this research reveals no impression formation value or reputational protection from including such disclaimers in profiles and bios. The presence of a disclaimer did not mitigate the attributional effect of [re]tweets. Positive and negative perceptions of the individual poster *and* the poster's organization were stable, regardless whether a disclaimer was included in the poster's profile. A broad and generalized statement in a user's profile does not meaningfully offset the user's active decision to (re)broadcast content, which is incorporated as a cue to the user's person and to the user's organization, impacting reputational assessments of the organization.

This finding is consistent with Goffman's (1959) supposition that cues passively given off (i.e., disclaimer) are less diagnostic of an individual's self than cues actively given (i.e., [re]tweets) to others. Given these two findings, organizations and managers may be better served by encouraging or requiring employees to simply *omit* disclosing their organizational affiliations in their profiles, lest any wayward or ill-taken tweets reflect poorly on the organization. Such practices may be even more critical for organizations without broad public awareness (like General Dynamics among college students), and therefore for whom many users' first exposure to the organization may be via one of its members, whose statements and behaviors facilitate initial schema, leading to development of reputational assessments.

Limitations and Future Work

These findings provide opportunities on which future work can build. One valuable contribution would be to overcome the present study's limitation of zero-history

targets with no expectation of future interaction. Perceptions of previously-unknown targets affords control in testing nuances in perceptions and impression formation, as they are not influenced by an abundance of additional information or established relational context. But schema tuning occurs throughout all relational phases, and new information can spur substantive schema tuning even in established, close relationships (Planalp et al., 1988). As such, future work may explore the boundaries of what degrees of deviation from established schema are necessary in online disclosures before schema tuning occurs, and how long those effects last.

Another opportunity is to expand this research beyond its methodological and sampling constraints to further increase its generalizability. This study presents a U.S.-centric manipulation, focuses on a major U.S. company with global ties, and uses a predominantly-white college student sample. As this study assessed conceptually-guided human communication phenomena, we expect the findings will translate well for similar messages (i.e., valanced messages; tweets vs. retweets) to other domains and audiences. However, we acknowledge our contribution is limited to a WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; Afifi and Cornejo, 2020) context, and thus findings require additional exploration in non-white and non-WEIRD contexts.

Additionally, the present study considered how the personal statements of a general employee could affect perceptions of their broader organization. Future work may consider how an organizational member's specific role influences this process. Due to the nature of an individual's association with the organization, the online statements of a corporate communication manager (as in the opening anecdote) may be more strongly associated with the company than similar statements from an entry-level worker. Further, the personal actions and statements of executives and official spokespersons may be perceived to have legitimacy outside the organizational context (Johansson and Ottestig, 2011), making the relationship between interpersonal and organizational perceptions stronger. In short, a vice-president or member of the corporate communications team may be viewed as an exemplar of the organization, even in her or his personal behavior. Future work should consider the concomitant effect of a user's organizational status on the strength of the interpersonal-organizational perceptual bond in both online and offline contexts (e.g., wearing a name badge outside of the convention hall or during a non-work encounter).

Conclusion

What we say affects how others perceive us, even when our statements are made in online profiles and messages. The present research demonstrates two important extensions to this axiom: First, what we repeat from others influences how others perceive us; and second, how others perceive us also affects how they will perceive our identified employing organization. As more self-presentation occurs online, the blurring of personal and professional boundaries increases as well (Piercy and Carr, 2020), leading to distinct challenges for corporate communications praticitioners seeking to

manage relationships and reputation. Therefore, individuals and organizations alike need to be mindful of the personal and organizational implications of their self-presentation. As disclaimers do not appear to have the intended protective effect, organizations would be better served by developing corporate social media policies that limit the visibility of the relationship between the individual and the employer on social media rather than requiring disclaimers. Statements like the one in the first opening anecdote have implications for how others may understand both the poster and the poster's organization, and so the resultant firing was likely warranted. But (ironically and paradoxically) not having disclosed or made public her role as corporate communication manager for her organization may have saved her job by disassociating herself—and thus others' perceptions of her—from the organization.

Endnotes

[1] All pretest statements and reported goodwill means are available in the online supplemental material. See "Pretest Results Table.docx" at https://osf.io/eby3u/?view_only=4a7d6a2eb5444d0895e4925c69a8d177

[2] The valences of the "I don't get it. How can a hard working professional individual such as my[self]/ teammates bungle a work project so badly???" pair of tweets may not seem immediately apparent. A likely explanation of this difference is that whereas "such as myself" is viewed as self-deprecation while still acknowledging one's hard work, "such as my teammates" seems an unprofessional denigration of coworkers. Moreover, general attitudes evoked by each message were empirically different in the pretest at the $p = .06$ level, supporting the suspected valence. Finally, that these messages are collapsed with the other two pairs to reduce potentially-spurious message effects should further alleviate concerns of a specific message's undue influence on the present results.

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Appendix A

Pretest Results for Social Attractiveness of Various Tweets

Message	Mean (SD)	Valence	Composite Mean (SD)
What you lack in talent can be made up for with desire, hustle, and giving 110% all the time.	5.52 (1.52) [a]	Positive	
drinks one bottle of water: I am so good at taking care of myself	4.29 (1.37) [a]	Positive	4.84 (1.00) [c]
I don't get it. How can a hard working professional individual such as myself bungle a work project so badly???	4.06 (1.13) [b]	Positive	
I don't get it. How can a hard working professional individual such as my teammates bungle a work project so badly???	3.16 (1.00) [b]	Negative	
drinks one bottle of vodka: I am so good at taking care of myself	2.91 (.93) [a]	Negative	2.72 (.94) [c]
What you lack in talent can be made up for with lying, cheating, and finding someone rich to mooch off of.	1.97 (1.14) [a]	Negative	

[a] Paired statements significantly differed, $p < .005$

[b] Paired statements differed, $p = .06$

[c] Aggregated statements differed, $p < .001$

Full descriptive results of the pretests, including all organizations and messages, can be accessed via: https://osf.io/eby3u/?view_only=4a7d6a2eb5444d0895e4925c69a8d177