Organizational participation on social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) is ubiquitous (Ganesh & Stohl, 2013), yet little is known about whether and how the interactions between organizational representatives and various stakeholders on these platforms impact organizational practices such as organizational identity construction. Organizational identity has been studied extensively by various disciplines and from multiple perspectives (see Dawson, 2015; He & Brown, 2013, for recent reviews). This article presents a typology of online communities that co-author organizational identity through confirming and disconfirming identity messages. Through extensive qualitative research, including interviews, marketing meetings observations, and social media interaction observations, social media communicative practices are examined through a communication constitutive of organizing (CCO) framework, specifically the conversation-text dialectic of the Montreal School. By focusing the research on boundary-spanning social media marketers and their interpretations of social media interactions, this article demonstrates ways that organizational identities are co-authored from external interaction (conversation) to internal practice (text). This study contributes to the ongoing theoretical extension of the CCO framework beyond the container metaphor, while also contributing to the practice of social media marketing within and around organizations.
illuminates the communicative impact of digital collectives on organizational practices. To interrogate this impact, however, observing and recording social media posts and comments alone are not sufficient. The focus ought to be on the stakeholders organizations interact with and the translation and interpretation of these interactions into organizational discourse. Social media marketers, self-described in this study as “community managers” and referred to as such from here on out, are in a unique position to provide this insight.

In the management, public relations, and marketing literatures much has been written about the influence of organizations on brand-based social media communities. The nurturing of these communities fosters brand trust and brand loyalty in unprecedented ways (Larochelle, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). The number of comments and likes has become reflective of brand popularity and a steady measure of organizational engagement and relationship building with customers (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012). Social media is used to build customer engagement and community involvement, as well as organizational and brand authenticity (Curtis et al., 2010; Diga & Kelleher, 2009; Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). The literature predominantly focuses on the impact of organizational practices on said communities; however, not the other way around. This article explores how brand-based social media communities breach organizational boundaries through interaction, influencing conceptualizations of organizational identity among organizational members via identity-confirming and disconfirming messages.

Identity practices among organizational members are influenced by outsiders’ perceptions of the organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). At the base of this argument, developed years before the Web 2.0 proliferation, sits the public image of an organization (called “construed organizational image”). This organizational image is the outward representation of the organization’s identity and is understood as process-based, multiple, and dynamic (Cheney & Christensen, 2001): always open to negotiation by outsiders and insiders alike. While organizational identity processes did involve co-authoring even before the advent of social media, social networking sites have redefined this negotiation and its impact in ways not yet fully explored. Alternatively, social networking platforms are new tools capable of facilitating age-old behaviors (Shirky, 2008), providing an opportunity to make connections between a variety of literatures and perspectives, old and new, in order to explore seemingly novel communicative practices.

In this study, the interactions surrounding an organization’s social media presence are interpreted through a communicative constitutive of organizing (CCO) lens, specifically utilizing a main dialectic (conversation-text) of the Montreal School (TMS) (Taylor & Van Every, 2000), and focusing on organizational identity as communicative practice. Due to its view of interaction as organizing action, the CCO framework is especially useful in the ever-changing, fluid, and highly interactive landscape of social media. Similarly, viewing organizational identity as a communicative phenomenon (vs a managerial one) aligns with the interactive social-media context.

Consequently, this study focuses on the organizational impact of social media brand-based community interactions through the interpretations of the community managers in charge of leading these conversations. In addition to describing the unique work roles of the marketers in this identity-bound process of confirmation and disconfirmation, it outlines which community members are listened to by the organizations and why. Community managers are a relatively unique kind of employee, essentially tasked with spanning boundaries, regularly making and negotiating external contact as part of their job (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Boundary spanners in particular see their interpretations of organizational identity heavily influenced by outsiders (Bartel, 2001). From a TMS perspective, the role of the boundary-spanning community manager then becomes one of translation between ongoing social media interaction and organizational practice.

**Conversation-Text and Organizational Identity Beyond the Container Metaphor**

From a Montreal School perspective, organizations are discursive creations where discourse is “the study of language in use,” including daily conversation generative of organizational practice (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Organizations emerge “in the intersection of a) an ongoing object-oriented conversation specific to a community of practice, and b) the text that names, represents, or pictures it” (Taylor, 2006, p. 156). In other words, organizations are linguistically “authored” in seemingly innocuous daily conversations between employees about a multitude of tasks. In the process, the conversations become more stable, but never monolithic, organizational texts and enduring practices (Kuhn, 2008). The relationship between conversation and text is a recursive one, too, suggesting that ongoing daily conversation is as generative to relative stable organizational practices as these practices are generative of ongoing daily conversation (Putnam, 2013).

This action-focused organizing gains traction in a social-media context because of its implied emphasis on interaction and the communicative and collective backdrop of consubstantializing organizational identity. Brand fan pages (an organization’s image representation in the contexts of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) are curated by community managers to reflect the community’s relationship with the brand, broaden the relationship between brand and community, and provide information and a social identity benefit to the members of these communities (De Vries et al., 2012).
At the same time, CCO has focused attention on the internal conversations between employees as constitutive of organization (Kuhn, 2008), rarely accounting for external conversations such as those ongoing on social media. Yet, conceptualizations of organizational membership have moved beyond the container metaphor, becoming inclusive of various forms of contributorship and collective actorship, statuses achieved through the contribution of actions to the organization not necessarily from within (Bencherki & Snack, 2016; Kavada, 2015). This move necessitates that contributing forces from outside the organization are seriously considered even by fields of study normally interested only in “internal” organizational processes.

Yet, the container metaphor is a persistent descriptor of formal organizations. The associated idea that organizations have some kind of (symbolic) boundary delineating them from the environment is a fairly dominant one. In this study, the notion of boundary is in fact useful because it helps conceptualize the formal organizations studied. Paradoxically, organizational boundaries—the structural, material attributes of the formal organization—are stretched if not collapsed by contemporary digital media (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2012). Social media collectives beyond these boundaries contribute their interpretation of the organization and, through concerted action, may impact practices and, ultimately, an organization’s substance or identity. Christensen & Cornelissen, (2011) explain that these collectives “pay attention to certain things, like ‘gaps’ and inconsistencies in corporate messages” (p. 403) and proceed to interpret, negotiate, and co/deconstruct these messages accordingly. This study is based on the assumption that brand-based social media communities impact organizational identity practices through interpreting, negotiating, and co/deconstructing organizational messages posted in social-media contexts. It is in this process of negotiation and its internal organizational response that an organization’s identity emerges:

The organization is made real, a “self” in communication. And it is that “making real” in communication that enables it subsequently to become real, materially, as a distinguishable actor, in the sense of enabling and negotiating the complex coordination of a very large constituency of members who, with the intermediacy of their technologies, have become its effective agents, identifiable as its representatives—its emissaries. It now exists in the world, materially, as well as discursively. Its identity is affirmed. (Taylor, 2011, p. 1278)

Affirmed, but never fixed, an organization’s identity is always adaptively unstable (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), remaining flexible to respond to multiple interpretations, from inside and out, which may continually confirm or disconfirm existing notions of substance. Substance is achieved through a process underpinning the organizing role of conversation, called coorientation. Coorientation is the orienting of conversation toward task accomplishment. Along with the conversation-text dialectic, and the underlying process of translating daily interaction to organizational practice, coorientation forms the basis of TMS. Conversation, or the lived experience equated here with interaction to encompass “likes” in a social-platform context, is elevated to organizational text (various relatively stable practices) via coorientation (Taylor, 2006).

Coorientation is the root of organizing because it implies action and collectivity, and a common object to be oriented toward (i.e., a sales goal, a number of “likes”). A common object to be oriented toward in the context of a brand page is the organization itself and everything it stands for in the conversations of a brand-based community. For example, this study demonstrates how messages shared in social-media contexts are interpreted (translated) by boundary-spanning social media marketers as a continually redefined organizational identity answering the question “Who are we as an organization based on these messages?”.

Community and Identification in the Social Organization

Communities of practice are the type of community most frequently studied within organizations. This makes sense because communities of practice revolve around knowledge sharing, a process essential for organizing. Defined as groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), communities of practice do not necessarily share much in common with the communities in focus here. Brand-based social media communities form around brands, organizations, and their representations on social media platforms. This type of community is usually defined broadly, as a group initiated and nurtured on social media platforms by the brand or organization itself (Laroche et al., 2012). While this type of community closely resembles the type of organizational community discussed in this study, there is a key difference. In the branding literature, where the term comes from, this community carries a decidedly positive connotation, suggesting fandom. In the present study, positivity or brand fandom is not assumed and is not always present. Hence, brand-based social media community is redefined here as the cumulative number of stakeholders who have liked, followed, or otherwise repeatedly interacted in either a positive or negative manner with an organization on its social networking platforms.

Kuhn (2008), explaining his use of the phrase “social side of firms” (italics in original, p. 1230), suggests that organizational interaction with external stakeholders has a constitutive effect of an authoritative system of cooriented and distributed action within and around the organization. Thus, organizing, which is generally understood as taking place between organizational members, is extracted and extended to external stakeholders. The process culminates in an authoritative text, an abstract textual representation of the collective, which denotes relative stability of norms constituting the organization (i.e.,

Dawson
This authoritative text is achieved through a series of discursive practices—such as online conversations, likes, and follows, and the organizing actions resulting from such interactions. The process and its practical (textual) consequences are explicated in “the social organization” —an expression borrowed from Bradley and McDonald’s (2011) book on harnessing the collective genius of customers and employees.

The social-media context is characterized by extensive interaction between organizations and their digital stakeholders presenting an opportunity to “extend” the organization to the outsider rendering it “social.” The particular affordances of social media (editability, publicity, persistence, and immediacy; Scott & Orlikowski, 2012), and their application in the organizational context, suggest that the impact of social media is mostly dependent on how it is used by those involved, be they employees or not. Organizations in their digital presence must navigate these affordances in ways that reap the benefits of sociality (i.e., organizational learning, image management) without sacrificing too much control over the interaction. Scott and Orlikowski (2012) demonstrate both the benefit and drawback of the material consequences of Trip Advisor customer reviews. A method to mitigate the drawbacks and increase the benefits of social media is to foster identification among organizational brand-based communities.

In a social organization, formerly internal processes, such as identification, are no longer relegated to insiders. Identification is defined as the value alignment between organizational practices and individual decision-making, achieved through persuasion and central to the continued success of an organization (Cheney, 1983). The “extraction” of organizational identification to external stakeholders, in addition to organizational members, provides a more parsimonious view of identification (Scott & Lane, 2000) and may explain why brand-based social media communities of “followers” exist. Organizations dedicate resources toward fostering employee identification because, in addition to ensuring that employees make organizationally sanctioned decisions at all times, identification allows for organizational control over its members (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

Branding scholars studying customer-company identification have repeatedly demonstrated that outsiders identify with organizations of which they are not members and that brands work to foster such identification, too. Similarly, controlling a customer’s decisions to like, buy, and use a brand is the goal (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). By extending a traditionally internal, organization-driven constitutive concept of identification outside the symbolic organizational boundaries, we can begin to think of social media brand-based communities as capable of constituting related practices, such as organizational identity, through their identification with the organizations they follow.

This article examines the impact of brand-based social media communities on organizational identity practices through conversation/interaction in a social-media context. It specifically asks, what do brand-based communities look like? And how does the social media platform interaction between organizations and these communities constellate managers’ notions of organizational identity? These questions are answered through a focus on (1) participant description of work roles, (2) participant interpretation of social media interaction, and (3) the organizational identity statements (i.e., “my organization has a friendly, informative, and colorful presence on social media”) used by social media marketers in interviews and meetings to describe their workplace.

**Method and Material**

The participants in this study came from 20 diverse organizations in the Western United States.1 The diversity of the participating organizations presents a benefit to this study by reinforcing transferability of the results across organizational types (i.e., for-profit, nonprofit). The study’s concern with social media communities and their impact on the organizations they surround is enriched by the variety of for-profit and nonprofit organizations aiming to create brand-based communities unique to their own model of business, yet relying on common community structuring and messaging themes. Participating organizations and their representatives were recruited through a local social media marketing club, guaranteeing (1) that the participants had social media marketing background and (2) that the participating organizations had an active social media presence.

A wide variety of for-profit organizations participated in the study: a large online retailer, a natural sweeteners company, a fitness company, a job placement agency, a city entertainment publication, a promotions company, three marketing agencies representing various clients, a supplement manufacturer, a software company, a technology company, and a small family farm. Although the nonprofit organizations were fewer, they were equally diverse: a public services company, a museum, a special interest club, three university departments (two different universities), and a neighborhood development foundation. A total of 27 community managers (ages 22–51, 11 females and 16 males) who worked for these organizations were interviewed about the activities associated with managing an organizational presence on social media platforms.

The primary method of data collection was interviewing. The semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) were carried out in person, in locations selected by the participants, lasted between 30 and 60 min each, and were recorded. The strength of interviewing in general, and semi-structured interviewing in particular, is in the method’s ability to elicit participants’ life stories (Kvale, 1996). Driven by the goals of this study, the type of life stories described by Kvale became “work life
stories”—sources of valuable information about the kind of work community managers performed and the specific interactional and organizational challenges they faced. In these work life stories, participants discussed social media community creation, their grasp of organizational identity, and the process of interacting with communities online. To answer the questions posed by the study, in the interviews, we focused on the employees’ interpretation of daily interactions, which allowed an exploration of community structure and conversation translation into organizational text.

The interview guide was thematically designed to cover necessary descriptive data about the entailments of the community manager’s job, about organizational image and identity, about the impact of social media interactions on organizational practices and texts (i.e., routines and policies), and about specific interactions observed on organizational social media platforms. Conversations within the last theme included discussion by participants about the types of comments and community members (i.e., fans and friends) they frequently engaged with and saw as the brand’s community.

Data were also collected through social media marketing meeting observations. In total, the study includes data from six meetings, which were held by two of the organizations already participating in the study. Attempts were made to attend meetings at other organizations, but those were rejected. Scheduling of the meetings was congruent with that of the interviews: interviewing took place over 6 months, which roughly estimated to six once-a-month marketing meetings (including a break in meetings over 2 months due to scheduling conflicts in the first organization, and the sporadic character of marketing meetings in general in the second). Meetings observation has become a common method of data collection for within CCO because it allows for insight into communicative constitution in situ. For example, Chaput and colleagues (2011) recorded and analyzed a political debate during the meeting of a young political party in order to study identity consubstantialization among members. Presently, the observed meetings contextualized organization-community social media interactions as participants frequently and openly discussed online goings-on during these gatherings. Meetings also allowed observation of organizational identity consubstantialization in community managers’ conversations.

Finally, observed social media interactions provided key cross-reference contextual data between the interviews and meetings, contributing to a deeper understanding of the conversation-text dialectic. Social media interactions (posts and comments) on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and LinkedIn were recorded for each participant organization over the same 6-month period as the interviews and meetings. The timeframe was determined based on the overall time spent collecting interview data with the benefit that social media interactions were monitored while interviewing and meeting observations were ongoing, so they could be called forth upon relevant occasions.

In line with the iterative approach outlined by Tracy (2013), the data were analyzed according to the study’s central concerns of understanding the impact of social media interaction on the communicative constitution of organizational identity, simultaneously considering emerging themes and theory. All interviews, meeting proceedings, and field notes were transcribed. After transcriptions were completed, all data were printed and also imported to the qualitative software NVivo. Shifting between reading the printed pages, taking notes on developing stories, and organizing the data in NVivo allowed for patterns to emerge, generation of initial codes, and the development of themes—all activities included in primary-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013).

Coding proceeded with fairly descriptive, first-level codes, such as “conversation,” “organization,” and “community,” which were based on how frequently a word appeared in a transcript. Continued re-reading led to activating the first-level codes into processes: “having a conversation,” “representing the organization,” and “creating a community.” Memo writing while coding allowed emerging ideas about each interview, meeting, and social media interaction to be clarified in prospective conjecture (Tracy, 2013), illuminating the powerful communicative contributions of brand-based communities.

Brand-Based Communities 2.0

Community creation is one of the biggest organizational goals in the context of social media management. In fact, most of the participants referred to themselves as “community manager,” not social media marketers. Following is a descriptive breakdown of brand-based communities as presented by the common voice of this study’s participants. This breakdown is important because it explains the levels in which communities are thought to contribute to interaction and organizational practice by the managers.

James, a social media strategist for a fitness products company, posited community building as the goal of his social media interaction: “For the most part, all of our platforms are trying to create a community of people who are passionate and not just for our brand, but what our brand is supposed to mean.” In the interviews and meetings conducted for this study, the word community was mentioned 98 times, fan 128 times, partner 31 times, follower 220 times, friends and friendship were mentioned 119 times, advocate 39 times, and ambassador 12 times. In other words, the participants in this study had a focus on typologizing their stakeholders, without having been asked in the interviews to do so. They clearly distinguished between types of community membership and easily shifted between these types and their place in the emerging community structure. The different type of community member represented a perceived difference in involvement with or contribution to the organization’s goal. Thus, understanding the emerging structure of the communities that organizations sought to create, listen to,
and manage aided in making sense of organizational identity and its communicative constitution in interaction.

**From Organizational Fan to Ambassador**

As described by the collective voice of the participants, social media communities are made up of fans, followers, partners, friends, advocates, and ambassadors. Each of these groups has different characteristics and, more importantly, appears to represent a specific level of involvement with the organization. The interactions with different groups, as demonstrated below, contribute to the way community managers, and by extension others in the organization, construe the organization’s image and, on a deeper level, identity.

In this study, fans are generally perceived to be the lowest community denominator; they are everyone who likes an organization on a given platform. Followers are not simply Twitter followers, but people who have expressed interest in the organization by liking a few posts, commenting occasionally, maybe participating in a contest; still, their association with any given organization is loose. Organizations usually refer to other businesses (i.e., vendors) as partners and strive to connect with them on platforms in order to build mutually beneficial business relationships. Interaction between organizations and partners is limited to mentions, tags, retweets, or praise, no negative comments.

Friends (different from Facebook’s definition of friends) go beyond following: these are the people who regularly engage with the organization in a positive manner. For example, Alice, a social media writer for a sweeteners company, during a meeting talked fondly of the women she (as company representative) would regularly interact with on Facebook. The women were described as friends of the company because they regularly contributed likes, positive comments, and product reviews. Advocates are the people who openly stand up on behalf of the organization, usually during disparaging comments. Organizations frequently relied on advocates to respond to negative comments, a practice so common that individual advocates were often well known to the organization.

Ambassadors are community members who in some way work for the organization, yet they are not part of it, at least not in the traditional sense of employment. They are not in the employee directory, rarely if ever get paid with money, and usually haven’t even met organizational members in person or been to the office. However, they may write content for social media purposes (i.e., as third-party bloggers), or use product in ways that are beneficial to the organizational image (i.e., provide photos). In this sense, social media ambassadors might be the most valuable nonmembers of an organization today.

Consequently, when asked whether they considered ambassadors to be organizational members, many participants responded with an unequivocal “yes.” All participants placed importance on their brand-based social media communities, with two example organizations. Both RunningHigh and NatureSweet actively engaged with their communities—paying ambassadors with free product, using community-generated image content to post and repost on social media feeds, and reveling in unsolicited praise of advocates. Ambassadors and advocates would confirm the organization’s identity in online comments—a confirmation that reverberated through organizational boundaries. As reported by James (RunningHigh),

> Our ambassadors come to retreats and get education about the company, the product, we get to know them, and we become friends. Their pictures and posts, they make us authentic. Of course, we have guidelines . . . don’t post photos of your shoes!

The ambassadors’ and advocates’ posts, and the organizational practices these posts spur (i.e., guidelines), give sense to the organization’s identity as described by James:

> We try to make it a point to always respond to our customers. We are a really young company; we depend on responding and just reaching out to people who are talking about space that we want to inhabit. It makes a huge difference; it creates these advocates that create our job for us.

Representatives of NatureSweet talked excitedly and extensively about one of their “super fans,” as well. She engaged in online conversations with the company regularly and positively, without prompt. She would post on the organization’s Facebook and Twitter feeds without expectation of reward, making her a super fan, but not an ambassador:

Rachel: We all know who Jenny is (chuckles) . . .

Sue: Oh my, gosh, yeah! We have got a super fan! A super fan! She likes every single thing that we have ever done, ever! And her name is Jenny and we don’t know her, but she . . . we don’t know her!

R: We have never paid her a cent, but I think she might have . . . Didn’t she win the Eating in Color Contest?

S: Yeah . . . She loves us!

R: She loves NatureSweet! I mean, we will take it, we are not complaining.

The excitement over this super fan shared during a social media marketing meeting is so palpable that eventually one of the employees admitted she had personally befriended Jenny on Facebook. This type of interpersonal engagement with community members was fairly common practice—most community managers could name a few people from their organization’s community who had left memorable impressions. The example of Jenny suggests that brand-based community members are regarded with interpersonal reverence previously reserved for colleagues.
Social networking platforms create an open forum between organizations and their community members, both benefiting from the association. This in turn facilitates the co-authoring of organizational practices, associated with and in response to interaction. An organization’s identity is in some ways always defined by its relationship with external stakeholders, but in the case of brand-based communities, extensively engaging on social media platforms creates a particular sense of identity exemplified in these communicative practices. Aaron, with a nonprofit organization, explained,

I think that it was a smart decision on part of our managers to say, “We can use their help and they can use ours.” So we take it seriously, we listen; we really talk about what is going on Twitter . . . Part of my job is to advocate for social media in meetings, for the people that talk to us. So, sometimes, we make changes based on what we’ve been hearing. It’s my job to bring that in.

This attitude had led followers of this organization to consistently rely on their Twitter feed for information and to incite change. Yet, the communication online is not always positive.

**Organizational Haters**

Some participants argue that social media is mostly about negativity. The communities of haters, as one writer from a nonprofit called some of her most frequent interlocutors on Twitter, have a status and power of their own. Organizations frequently have to deal with negative comments on social media platforms, and while participants claimed that negativity was more prominent in some industries than others, negative feedback was considered big part of the context. For example, Linda, a writer who spent most of her time on Twitter, knew the haters well. She readily described the practices associated with the times she and the other social media writers on her team got into conversations with naysayers:

They’re not the people who are tweeting you because they want information, they really dislike you—There’s one guy in Boston! He has his own blog, and he just . . . doesn’t hate us . . . but he will really stir the pot and put those half-truths out that get the other people going. The difficult part is trying to answer, we’ve done that in the past. You’re trying to be reasonable, but he is going for the shock. So, you have those people, but they’re not most people. Most of our followers hardly ever contact us. They just started following us to get updates.

In the relatively short time Linda had been around social media, the goal of negative comments (to generate an immediate, emotional response, a shock) had become an apparent part of everyday parlance. In the continuation of this example, Linda explained a practice: She either waited for the negativity to die down on its own while providing minimal well-measured feedback, or counted on advocates to jump in and close the conversation. Linda did not address the standard feedback she gave naysayers in the previous quote, but provided examples throughout the interview, just as other participants did. The following practice stands out: Most frequently, community managers actively tried to turn negative feedback into positive by making sense of it in the context of the organization’s identity. The goal of this strategy was for participants to make sense of negative feedback by screening it through the organization’s identity, demonstrating that their company listened, cared, and would act on “reasonable” requests. Because negative comments were interpreted as an opportunity to build on positive organizational identity traits, community managers admitted that they would consider negative and positive comments equally, thus legitimizing the impact of haters on the organization as routine.

**Constituting Organizational Identity**

The ways in which the organizations and their representatives made sense of social media interactions in terms of organizational identity are also gleaned from the types of messages shared by online communities. Two basic types were frequently observed—messages of positive or negative connotation. Positive messages included occurrences such as Facebook likes, Instagram loves, Twitter retweets, and written comments of satisfaction, praise, or gratitude. Negative messages included occurrences such as too few or no likes, loves, and retweets, and written comments of dissatisfaction, argument, and questioning. Community managers interpreted the positive and negative messages in terms of perceived confirmation or disconfirmation of existing organizational identity. Two instances representative of sentiments expressed by the study participants as a whole are outlined below.

**Identity-Confirming Messages**

The power of identity-confirming messages is exemplified in data from a marketing meeting at a small family farm with a big social media presence and ambitious community-building goals. The following quotes come from a meeting between the Sanders Family Farm (SFF) and the marketing agency they had hired to conduct social media efforts. The interaction echoed discussions of identity confirmations by participants in meetings and in individual interviews. Explained is the meaning of *likes* by an agency expert:

Total page likes, you are up to 2900, that’s up 4% and you’ve gotten111 new likes compared to the previous week. This page is all about weeks, so everything is compared to the previous week. Don’t get discouraged by the pluses and minuses, because sometimes you might have an awesome week where you get tons of likes and engagement, and next week it is going to tell you that you are doing miserably, but that is in comparison to your amazing week.

This quote exemplifies standard meeting conversation negotiating the meaning of Facebook likes and other activity.
The explanation of varying numbers showcases the analytics functioning behind social media platforms and suggests the inherent co-authoring of what it means to be a successful organization in this context. There is a sense that the fluctuation of likes feels personally confirming or disconfirming, identified by words such as “discouraged,” “awesome,” “miserable,” and “amazing.” The process described above indicates the surprisingly deep meaning of legitimizing organizational identity through social media activity. The weekly ebb and flow in likes became personal to the farm employees, the number of likes potentially meaning livelihood, reflecting dedicated effort.

Making sense of Facebook likes is an endeavor of co-orientation and continuous negotiation. During the meeting, aspects of social media statistics were brought up and debated, their meaning for the organization uncertain. Eventually, the participants came back to likes and this was when the head farmer looked up a specific post from a week prior about a major farm event coming up. Once he saw that only two people had liked his post, he was upset. His reaction can be explained by the context of the meeting—the team had been brought together to discuss the event, which surprisingly to everyone had not garnered much attention among the community. As the team sat around the computer, they questioned not simply the meaning of the community’s communication (or lack thereof) but also the meaning of the event, and the meaning of the farm within this community. As a result, the strategy changed and it was decided that volunteers would be enticed with free produce, instead of “Facebook friendship.” In this sense, the gaining of a like is a confirmation, but the gaining of too few likes is a disconfirmation, suggesting that the right number is continuously renegotiated.

Identity Disconfirming Messages

In a quote of two parts, Linda, a writer for a public services agency, echoed the experiences of other participants interviewed, and quickly provided examples of the disconfirming messages she dealt with on a regular basis:

“They constantly bring up how much the executives are being paid! That would come up whenever we have issues. It would be like, “Well, if you didn’t pay your executives . . .” You want to say, “I understand you may have a gripe with what they get paid, but let’s be clear: Even if we paid them less, you’re looking at $300,000 . . . That’s a drop in a bucket, means nothing.” But you can’t really react that way because they don’t really want to hear it.

As a public company, Linda’s organization had to disclose executive salaries, which often created storms on social media. Her words, “But you can’t really react that way because they don’t really want to hear it,” are emblematic of experience dealing with disconfirming conversations online—arguing with your community doesn’t pay off.

Organizations, and their representatives, risk far less by giving in to negative comments. Interpretation of the organization’s presence in the social-media context, and that context’s characteristics, determines what can be confirmatory or not:

Social media, it feeds itself! That’s why I think it’s funny that we have the haters. I look at them and think you spend so much time looking into everything about the RMTA, like it’s a hobby! They probably analyze other ones too, but obviously RMTA is a big deal because they are tweeting every day. And you’re just thinking, “I work for it and I’m not that interested . . .”

Interviewer:  Is it flattering?
L:  It is. Well, I think it’s better to be obsessed with us than drugs. “We’ll just be mad at RMTA. We’ll take it on. It’ll be our cheap therapy.” But they do seem to be really involved. There’s a guy that tweets us twice a day . . .

The consideration of social media as a structure that “feeds itself” with negativity, outside of any individual community member, is a way in which the participant eventually made sense of identity disconfirming messages. To make sense of what is happening between her organization and its community, Linda resorted to the structure of social media platforms and her personal identity, both relatively stable references. In this context, all the attention, negative or positive, is flattering. Throughout the conversation, like other participants, Linda expressed the pride she derived from her work. Feelings of pride associated with one’s organization or the work one does for that organization have long been considered components of organizational identification. The admittance that even haters’ messages can be flattering exemplifies a practice through which organizational members turn disconfirming messages on social media platforms into confirming organizational identity experiences, in part through their own identification.

Conclusion, the Constitutive Power of Consubstantialization

This study sought to describe brand-based social media communities and asked how interactions between organizations and their brand-based communities consubstantiate organizational identity. The study contributes to two relatively unexplored areas of research: (1) the role social media play in the process of organizing and (2) the role of various stakeholders, including but not limited to organizational members, in the social co-construction of organizational identity.

The interpretation of organizational identity-confirming and disconfirming messages on social media platforms is an equivocal process. Ultimately, confirming and disconfirming identity messages, and the communities within which they originate, act upon the organizations through the conversations of community managers and other employees. This
action is demonstrated in statements of organizational identity. Statements of organizational identity usually begin with the common “we”—an identification technique frequently used by organizations to promote and underscore collective decision-making (Cheney, 1983). These statements are usually made in conversation between organizational members during meetings. For example, Geraldine from NatureSweet made the following identity statement during a meeting:

We really talk about the bees. We try to be a colorful brand, not only in our imagery, also in our voice. We have this one on one engagement online. I feel like we do a really good job at sounding authentic and actually caring and wanting to make sure that whomever we are engaging with, has a positive experience with us and that we can build that relationship into a friendship, just like this online friendship.

An important takeaway emerging from this quote is that conversations during meetings contain interpretations of social media interactions, which constitute specific organizational identity practices, exemplifying the conversation-text dialectic. In this sense, statements of organizational identity are interpreted as negotiated authoritative texts constituting more permanent practice. For example, according to some

| Organization          | Type (for-profit/ non-profit) | Social media presence                                     | Participants (role)                                                                 |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ArtM                  | For-profit                    | Facebook, Twitter                                         | Tim (social media strategist)                                                     |
| ArtS                  | For-profit                    | Facebook, Twitter                                         | Mac (social media strategist)                                                     |
| ArtT                  | For-profit                    | Facebook, Twitter, YouTube                                 | Patrick (social media strategist)                                                 |
| CityProm              | Non-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter                   | Chris (social media strategist and writer)                                        |
| ClearComm             | For-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube                     | Dan (social media strategist), Pete (social media writer), Page (social media writer) |
| EducationNow          | Non-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube                     | Ally (social media strategist and writer)                                         |
| HealthOne             | Non-profit                    | Facebook, Twitter                                         | Scott (social media strategist and writer)                                        |
| IntelliSoft           | For-profit                    | Facebook, LinkedIn                                        | Charles (social media strategist)                                                 |
| JobSearch             | For-profit                    | Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter                              | Jane (social media writer)                                                       |
| NatureSweet           | For-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter                  | Rachel (social media strategist), Sue (social media strategist), Alex (social media strategist), Geraldine (social media strategist and writer), Alice (social media writer) |
| OnlineMarket          | For-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, YouTube         | Caroline (social media writer)                                                   |
| PlayTogether          | Non-profit                    | Facebook, Twitter, Instagram                              | Susan (social media writer)                                                       |
| ProSocMed             | Non-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter                              | Jim (social media strategist), Tom (social media strategist and writer)          |
| RockyMttnTrans        | Non-profit                    | Facebook, Twitter, YouTube                                | Linda (social media writer), Aaron (social media writer)                         |
| RunningHigh           | For-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube                    | James (social media strategist)                                                   |
| Sanders Family Farm   | For-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest                           | Tanya (social media strategist and writer), Larry (farmer and social media strategist), Josh (social media strategist and writer) |
| Supplements 123       | For-profit                    | Facebook                                                  | Robert (social media strategist and writer)                                      |
| Today24               | For-profit                    | Facebook, Twitter                                         | Roger (social media strategist and writer)                                         |
| University Sports     | Non-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter                              | Rene (social media writer)                                                       |
| University Sports2    | Non-profit                    | Facebook, Instagram, Twitter                              | Brent (social media strategist and writer), Madeline (social media writer)        |

Table 1. Organizations and participants.

*Organization that participated in marketing meetings. Participants listed include meeting participants.

aMarketing meeting participants who did not provide interviews in addition to meeting participation.
participants, organizations rarely characterized relationships as friendships, especially not online friendships, before the arrival of Facebook. In the continuation of the conversation above, the team discussed how this emerging identity of a colorful, friendly brand that cares is to be represented on social media. As another participant noted when the conversation turned to charging shipping fees, “We need to be careful, friends don’t charge friends fees. Do we really want to be that company?”

A notable characteristic of the organizational identity statements is that although the impetus of their creation resides firmly within an organization’s brand-based community, they are further authored internally, behind closed doors, evoking a permeable, yet existing, boundary. Echoing findings by Chaput and colleagues (2011), the best examples of identity statements were found within departmental and team meetings focused on social media conversations. In this study, organizational identity was consubstantialized between members with the input of outside communities.

The power of brand-based social media communities is revealed in the co-authoring of identity statements based on confirming and disconfirming messages and it is implied in the emerging typology of nonemployee community members. Fans, friends, advocates, ambassadors, and haters do not describe brand-based communities alone. They represent novel organizational discourse constituted in and through social media interaction. While organizations, their brands, and identities are always somewhat socially constructed, social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram elicit a previously untapped level of sociality. This study demonstrates that social media interactions are not simply another marketing tool but instead possess communicative, and thus constitutive, power that impacts the organizational structure in terms of identity conceptualizations.

As any study, this one has limitations. It bridges vast literatures spanning significant time to make sense of a novel context through established processes, such as organizational identity, identification, interaction (conversation), and organizational practice (text). Such connections are not always smooth and will be significantly improved over time through further exploration of the impact of social media interaction in particular and external stakeholder interaction in general on the systems and structures of organizations. Furthermore, this study focuses on the interpretations of social media marketers, or community managers, exclusively. The decision to do so is theoretically driven, but it nevertheless presents a future opportunity to involve representatives of the brand-based social media communities. Additionally, in their boundary-spanning role, community managers who have direct communication with external stakeholders may be most influenced by the interaction. The marketing meetings attended provided insight into the interpretations of people not directly involved with social media interactions, but their perspectives were not investigated further. Finally, this study utilized a sample of diverse organizations. It might be revealing to focus on a bigger sample of one type of organization to compare the processes elicited here.

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Notes
1. Table 1 contains breakdown of organizations and participants.
2. Participant names and most organizational identifiers have been altered to protect confidentiality.

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