

ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY AS CO-CREATED VALUE

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore how co-creational processes contribute to organizational legitimacy as a valuable outcome for organizations. 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with digital communication professionals from a variety of organizations in the United States to better understand the use of social media platforms and perceptions of value from engaging with stakeholders in co-creation. Results showed that organizations engaged in co-creation of brand meaning via different methods such as referrals and feedback and that organizations reached different kinds of outcomes via these co-creational processes. These include being a resource for stakeholders, gaining brand advocates, reaching organizational goals, and being able to develop as an organization. In addition, results showed organizations that engaged in co-creation of brand meaning put an effort in measuring these processes qualitatively to continuously improve as an organization. Based on these results it was possible to illuminate the relationship that exists between legitimacy and co-creation of brand meaning. Thus, it was discussed organizational legitimacy appears to be an outcome of co-created brand meaning in the form of moral legitimacy and actional legitimacy.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Organizations seek to establish legitimacy through adherence to social values and norms of acceptable behavior within the larger social systems in which they operate. From an organizational perspective, this means adjusting processes and policies to multiple, and often competing stakeholder values, expectations, and norms (Oliver, 1996). Palazzo and Scherer (2006) posed “if corporate legitimacy is based upon the characteristics of the societal environment it can be assumed that deep environmental changes have a significant influence on the social expectancies towards organizations, which again may lead to alterations in corporate behavior” (p. 73). Today’s Information Age or Digital Era has seen revolutionary environmental changes in the forms of digital technology and social media that have impacted the way organizations operate and communicate as legitimate societal entities. McCorkindale (2010) reported 69% of Fortune 2000 companies were using social networking sites, and 37% planned to use more of them over the next five years. Not only have communication tools and technologies evolved, but also stakeholder expectations about how organizations will use new media to communicate with them are constantly evolving.

The use of social media has gained particular relevance for organizational communication in the field of public relations (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2017). Indeed, scholars have argued that during a time of professional identity crisis (Smith, 2012), social media have brought increased legitimacy to the public relations profession itself because professionals are tasked with managing digital communication on behalf of their organizations (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009; Valentini, 2015). Scholarship surrounding online-related public relations has been one of the most researched areas during the past 15 years (Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010; Ye & Ki, 2012). Research has shown that stakeholders are not satisfied only talking *about* brands in the virtual sphere; rather, they

seek to function as coauthors by talking *with* the brands. (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Vernuccio, 2014). Mangold and Faulds (2009) suggested companies “must learn to talk with their customers, as opposed to talking at them, therefore influencing the discussions taking place in the social media space” (p. 361). Further, as Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) described, “Brand research increasingly recognizes the active role of multiple stakeholders in co-creating brand meaning and the importance of new social media supporting stakeholders in their co-creation efforts” (p. 1505).

Co-creation dates back to the twentieth century (Ind & Coates, 2013), but is a fast-developing concept in management, marketing, and branding (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). Co-creation has been defined in various ways; however, simply stated it refers to the interaction of organizations and stakeholders to create something of value (Humphreys, 2016; Ji, Li, North, & Liu, 2017; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). For example, Swarovski launched a design contest to engage with consumers about their watch designs with the purpose of producing the best consumer design (Füller et al., 2011). Current research about co-creation argued there are four building blocks that help organizations engage in co-creation: dialogue, access, transparency, and risk (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This research focused on the need for organizational two-way communication (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) that enables dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Lee, Oh, & Kim, 2013; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. offer great opportunities for organizations to reach multiple stakeholder groups directly (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and thus enables dialogue to occur via two-way communication processes with stakeholders. Therefore, dialogue may serve as a means for understanding co-creation as part of the legitimization of organizations. In other words, environmental changes in communication technologies and the way information is received have prompted organizations to adopt relevant communication

policies and procedures as part of the legitimization process. This study explores the role of co-creation using social media to create organizational value in the form of legitimacy.

Thus, with social media new dynamics have emerged (Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010; Fieseler & Fleck, 2013) that have allowed co-creation to occur via new communication methods (Büscher, 2016). Virtual co-creation has largely been examined from a consumer point of view (Füller, 2010a; Füller, 2010b; Füller et al., 2011; Sawhney, Verona, & Prandelli, 2005; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). However, if co-creational practices become beneficial for organizations when it is applied online remains ripe for investigation. Scholars argued that there are positive effects of engaging with stakeholders in co-creation, which include stronger relationships with the organization as well as increased loyalty and levels of trust (Füller, 2010b). This creates value for the organization. However, as an under-researched topic in the field of public relations, and one that is largely lacking in empirical evidence across disciplines (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), this study examines when these virtual co-creational processes become valuable to organizations. Because organizations must maintain legitimacy to secure survival in resource-competitive environments, there is a need to adapt to these environmental changes in order to accommodate stakeholders' needs and expectations. One way for organizations to do this is by engaging in virtual co-creational processes with stakeholders.

This manuscript first reviews the theoretical framework, legitimacy theory, that underpins this study. Organizational legitimacy is explored as a desirable and valuable outcome that may result from the co-creation of meaning between organizations and stakeholders. Next, social media as a public relations function that enables co-creation is explored, followed by co-creation as product innovation and meaning making. Based on the literature review the following research questions were developed and will serve as a guide

for this research: how are social media managers using co-creation, what value do social media managers see in co-creation, and how do social media managers evaluate co-creation?

To answer these research questions, a qualitative methodology was employed with a focus on semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect data. Results showed that organizations engaged in co-creation of brand meaning with stakeholders in varying degrees, and because they allowed stakeholders to contribute with brand meaning via these processes organizations gained value in the form of being a resource, gaining brand advocates, reaching organizational goals, and being able to develop as an organization. Furthermore, it was found that some of the organizations that engaged in co-creation of brand meaning with stakeholders also measured these co-creational processes qualitatively. In the last chapter it was finally discussed how organizations were able to gain legitimacy as a co-created value.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is primarily based on legitimacy and co-creation theory. First is focused on literature within legitimacy in the form of legitimacy as a theory, how legitimacy relates to the public relations discipline, organizational strategies used to build legitimacy, the challenges hereof, and how social media can be used as a means for legitimacy. Next is focused on strategic communication as a co-creational approach and the values organization can gain from these processes.

Theoretical Framework

Legitimacy is best understood as a precondition for organizations to exist. Maurer (1971) provided an early definition of the concept, “the process whereby an organization justifies to a peer or superordinate system its right to exist” (p. 361). Oliver (1996) described legitimacy as values, expectations, and social norms to which organizations must adapt. More recently, Deephouse and Carter (2005) stated legitimacy is defined by the organization’s ability to respond to expectations as well as normative, cultural, and changing conditions. This means the object of legitimacy and the object that is being assessed in terms of acceptance are organizations (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). The “beholders of legitimacy” (Zimmerman, 2002) or the “sources of legitimacy” (Ruef & Scott, 1998) are internal stakeholders, such as managers, employees, and members of the board as well as external stakeholders, such as funding agencies, unions, public opinion, and the media. Suchman (1995) argued legitimacy is dependent on a joint public. He posed that legitimacy is socially constructed because it “reflects a congruence between the behaviors of the legitimated entity and the shared beliefs of some social group” (p. 574). This means legitimacy is not dependent on specific observers, but on a collective group of people. For instance, if an organization

differs from individuals in terms of value, the organization is still able to maintain legitimacy because the difference in value is of no importance to the public in general. Suchman (1995) also argued legitimacy is a presumption or perception by explaining the public react to the organizations as they see it. To exemplify, an organization may deviate from social norms, but because the deviation is unnoticed by the public, the organization is able to sustain legitimacy.

Three different forms of organizational legitimacy have been identified by the literature: pragmatic legitimacy, cognitive legitimacy, and moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). Pragmatic legitimacy, also called exchange legitimacy, rests on the assumption of a self-interested audience where direct exchanges between publics and the organization take place. Organizations gain support from stakeholders because they believe the organization is acting in the public's interest (Wood, 1991). For example, if stakeholders experience benefit from organizational activities, they ascribe legitimacy to that particular organization (Suchman, 1995).

The second type of organizational legitimacy is referred to as cognitive legitimacy. This type of legitimacy consists of taken-for-grantedness and comprehensibility (Suchman, 1995). This type of legitimacy takes place at the subconscious level, which means it may only be managed to a small degree; direct, strategic manipulation and influence on public perception are difficult (Oliver, 1991; Suchman, 1995). For example, Nike made an effort to earn cognitive legitimacy when the company published the names of its supply-chain manufacturers (Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013). Nike did this in response to negative interaction with critical stakeholders to prove their new standards for sustainable supply chain management. Within a few days, Adidas and Puma also published the names of their supply-chain vendors. This example demonstrates the effect of adapting to a new institutional

context by competitors when one major organization take a step towards legitimation (Scherer et al., 2013).

Moral legitimacy, the third type of organizational legitimacy, is based on evaluations of an organization's activities and outcomes. For example, evaluation is based on judgements about whether organizational activities encourage social welfare (Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995) argued moral legitimacy results from public discussion. Moral legitimacy can only be accomplished by organizations that engage in discussions with stakeholders. For this reason, moral legitimacy must not be perceived as manipulating the public (as may be the case of cognitive legitimacy), but instead as deliberative communication.

Legitimacy in a Public Relations Context

Despite the fact that “establishing and maintaining organizational legitimacy is at the core of most, if not all, public relations activities” (Metzel, 2001, p. 321) little attention has been afforded the concept in the public relations scholarship (Wæraas, 2009). Scholars posed legitimacy as a major influencer for the future of public relations research (Boyd, 2000; Gower, 2006). According to Boyd (2000), research in public relations has in many years focused on institutional legitimacy. Institutional legitimacy functions on a macro level and rests on the understanding that inherent in institutions is legitimacy if the institution acts toward public interests. On the contrary, actional legitimacy has recently been introduced to the field of public relations and is largely based on daily public relations activities making publics able to become directly involved in organizational decision-making. This kind of legitimacy functions on a micro level, and the purpose for the organization is not to gain acceptance as a whole, but to gain acceptance for specific activities among demanding stakeholders. For example, Delta Airlines was the first airline company to discontinue smoking. This change in corporate policy challenged the company because of criticism from

the many smokers who flew with Delta Airlines. However, because Delta Airlines maintained the policy and many other airline companies chose to implement similar policies they managed to gain actional legitimacy for the change in their policy (Boyd, 2000).

Power structures have also been argued to take place in legitimation processes (Boyd, 2000, Motion, 2005). “Accepted as legitimate institutions, governments, corporations, and other large institutions are allowed by their publics to operate and exercise considerable authority and influence” (Boyd, 2000, p. 343-344). From an organizational perspective, Boyd (2000) contended that implementing specific actions in order to gain legitimacy can be translated into the use of power due to the fact that organizations get the stakeholders to achieve a certain perception of the organization. For example, the purpose behind a specific action may be to obtain a more positive perception among publics. Not only can it be argued power structures emerge among organizations when implementing actional legitimacy activities, but emerging power structures can also be argued from a stakeholder perspective since stakeholders obtain “legitimacy-determining power” (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978 cited in Boyd, 2000, p. 345). For example, a new product packaging can be an effort in gaining actional legitimacy (Boyd, 2000), but chances are stakeholders dislike the new product packaging which in the end may reduce legitimacy towards that particular organization since stakeholders do not agree with implementation of that particular action. In case the organization becomes aware of a general disagreement among stakeholders, they can attempt to legitimate their action by explaining why a new product packaging was necessary or adapt to stakeholder expectations and change the product packaging again. If the organization experiences a need for legitimizing the action to satisfy stakeholders, the stakeholders themselves have achieved power structures over the organization. Moreover, as this example

demonstrates actional legitimacy produces opportunities for dialogue between the organization and publics (Boyd, 2000).

Building Legitimacy

Dialogue is a process where the involved parties (e.g. between an organization and publics) communicate back and forth and thereby exchange ideas like an open discussion (Kent & Taylor, 1998). When it comes to actional legitimacy, the concept serves as a means for dialogue to occur between organizations and the public. Boyd (2000) described legitimacy as “socially constructed” (p. 346) and as a process where the public does not need to unanimously agree with the organization which is comparable with the requirements for dialogue. As posed by Kent and Taylor (2002) a dialogic approach includes five elements: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. Mutuality occurs when organizations are linked together with publics in a way where both parties make an effort to understand each other. Propinquity is when organizations temporarily and spontaneously interact with publics. Organizations and publics must also demonstrate empathy in the form of support and trust. For a dialogue to occur between organizations and publics the parties have to share information, beliefs, and desires which means unpredictable results can take place. Commitment, the last element, is built upon the four previous elements and refers to demonstrating honesty and a willingness to collaborate and interpret different points of view. Kent & Taylor (2002) also argued dialogue can serve as a motivator for legitimacy because dialogue can lead to increased public support and satisfaction.

Other approaches that can be applied to gain legitimacy are strategies such as strategic manipulation, isomorphic adaptation, and moral reasoning (Scherer et al., 2013). Strategic manipulation and isomorphic adaptation are predominantly managed by organizations via one-way communication activities (Gruning & Hunt, 1984; Morsing & Schultz, 2006) and

aim for pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy respectively (Scherer et al., 2013). However, moral reasoning relates to moral legitimacy (Castello, Etter, & Nielsen, 2016; Scherer et al., 2013) in terms of “participation in open multi-stakeholder platforms where the perception of general sentiment is prioritized at the resolution of the particular debates” (Castello et al., 2016, p. 424) and, thereby, prepare the ground for two-way communication. In fact, research shows organizations can gain moral legitimacy when recognizing the value of several publics, reducing control over engagement, and building dialogue with them which is referred to as the networked legitimacy strategy (Castello et al., 2016). Palazzo and Scherer (2006) argued for a shift from adhering to regulations and social expectations to “a more complex communicative process of accountability where these limits are defined and redefined in a continuous process of deliberative discourse” (p. 82); a shift from a pragmatic and a cognitive legitimacy approach to a moral legitimacy approach presents more challenges. Although research provides different ways for public relations practitioners to gain legitimacy, some challenges may arise when engaging in the legitimation processes.

Challenges of Legitimacy

Sometimes organizations get involved in different conflicts with society such as human rights violations, financial scandals, and other precarious issues that may challenge organizational legitimacy (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Due to the many different stakeholder groups that exist, it becomes impossible for any organization to satisfy each audience (Suchman, 1995). This is also the reason why it can be argued legitimacy exists in varying degrees. According to Pfeffer and Salanick (1978) it is uncertain how many percentages of publics who need to give acceptance to an organization in order for that organization to have legitimacy. On the other hand, no unanimous agreement among publics is demanded for legitimacy to exist. Therefore, they have described legitimacy as ambiguous, socially

constructed, and controlled by publics. After all, the most important consideration for legitimacy to exist is that a substantial number of stakeholders must approve it (Pfeffer & Salanick, 1978).

Based on a moral legitimacy perspective, the challenge of getting access to legitimacy is not implied in persuasion or manipulation, but it depends on engagement in true dialogue with stakeholders and on convincing stakeholders by reasonable arguments (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Motion (2005) suggested that engagement is effective when it minimizes or breaks down conflict and when power relations are set aside. This strategy may provide perceptions of agreement and unanimity, but in a public relations context it is risky due to conflicts and interests that will be retrained. In this regard, it has been argued free and unrestricted engagement is impossible without some kind of conflict (Mouffe, 1999). Therefore, a challenge for public relations practitioners is “to bring together multiple conflicting interests, take account of power relations, and achieve a consensus, moral compromise, or resolution” (Motion, 2005, p. 508).

Another challenge organizations may face is what approach they need to apply in order to respond to expectations in a complex society to develop legitimacy. Scherer et al. (2013) proposed three different approaches. A one-best-way approach that rests on the assumption that no matter what situation an organization faces there is only one best way to respond by applying the strategic manipulation strategy, the isomorphic adaptation strategy, or the moral reasoning strategy. The contingency approach assumes that, depending on the situation, corporations must identify one strategy that best fits the current situation. On the other hand, the paradox approach suggests organizations can apply all three strategies simultaneously. They contend the strategic manipulation strategy and the isomorphic adaptation strategy are no longer sufficient to rely on (Scherer et al., 2013) because of

increased heterogeneity and complexity in society (Child & Rodrigues, 2011; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Rather, organizations recognize the need for an alternative strategy; the moral reasoning strategy that calls for engagement and is built upon “a process of deliberation” (Scherer et al., 2013, p. 264).

Using Social Media as a Means for Legitimacy

As scholars have examined, stakeholder engagement has become a substantial mechanism for building legitimacy (Banerjee, 2003; Castello et al., 2016; Scherer et al., 2013). When it comes to two-way communication, Gower (2006) have argued for an urgent need to bring in literature from other disciplines into public relations and suggests looking more into the field of management literature. Castello et al. (2016) further developed a framework of legitimacy, examining how organizations can gain legitimacy when faced with multiple and often conflicting stakeholder agendas. They focused on a pharmaceutical corporation called Health Corporation and its engagement with stakeholders on Twitter. In the research Castello et al. (2016) introduced a new concept called the networked legitimacy strategy. Based on their findings the authors argued moral legitimacy is apparent in situations where an organization “reduces its efforts to control the engagement, recognizes the value of multiple publics, and establishes dialogues with them without imposing institutional conditions to external stakeholders” (p. 424). In addition, they argued in the context of social media and globalization, legitimacy emerges from the degree to which organizations engage in dialogue with stakeholders and acknowledge the value of its engaging counterpart. Overall, their research showed how an organization can develop legitimacy on social media by going from a strategy that focused on the inner circle such as conferences, face-to-face meetings, and workshops with salient stakeholders to a social media strategy that focused on all stakeholder groups and included engagement principles such as ‘Co-creating Solutions’

through ‘Social Media Dialogue’ and ‘Sharing Challenges in the Open’ (Castello et al., 2016).

With social media, new dynamics have developed and changed the way organizations communicate with stakeholders (Büscher, 2016; Fieseler et al., 2010; Fieseler & Fleck, 2013). Several studies have revealed social media provide excellent conditions for engagement to occur between organizations and its stakeholders (Colleoni, 2013; Castello et al., 2016; Fieseler et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2013; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). Organizations engaging with stakeholders on social media in an open discussion also embrace two-way communication (Fieseler et al., 2010) that gives the organization an opportunity to engage in dialogue with stakeholders that facilitates relationship building (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Lee et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2001). Since social media provide open platforms that allow public access, it gives opportunities for organizations to reach multiple stakeholders (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The platforms offer increased speed when communicating with stakeholders (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Sawhney et al., 2005), and the lack of gatekeeping that has been identified enables two-way communication between engaged partners (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). For instance, stakeholders can reply directly to posts on corporate blogs because of the integrated commentary function (Fieseler et al., 2010; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), which facilitates two-way communication (Fieseler et al., 2010). Yet, although social media have been characterized as having great potential for engagement, organizations fail to use them as such and rather embrace one-way communication (Fieseler et al., 2010; Kent, & Taylor, 2016; Lewis, 2003; Morsing & Schultz, 2006).

Despite the fact that social media provide opportunities to engage in two-way communication with stakeholders, and that organizations can use social media to develop corporate legitimacy, scholars have stated it is neither an easy nor automatic process of

incorporating engagement (Etter, 2013; Fieseler et al., 2010). For example, social media platforms possess a lack of formal hierarchies. Since the platforms allow public access, stakeholders have the opportunity to articulate any issues they are concerned with. Stakeholders are no longer passive, but instead are active receivers of information (Dellarocas, 2003; Etter, 2013; Gaither & Austin, 2016; Lee et al., 2013). According to Lee et al. (2013) stakeholders are “powerful creators, transmitters, and discussants of information” (p. 792). Because users on social media are responsible for their own posting, organizations are unable to completely control the content being published on social media (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Lee et al., 2013). In case users on social media have opinions that differ from the organization, they can reply negatively to that organization which may challenge organizational legitimacy (Dellarocas, 2003; Fieseler et al., 2010).

Although there are disadvantages for organizations when employing social media, Castello et al. (2016) argued for social media as a great tool when organizations are aiming for legitimacy building by engaging with stakeholders in the case they attempt to “reduce the control over the engagements and relate non-hierarchically with their publics” (p. 402). This means organizations who aim to engage with stakeholders in an environment that is controlled equally between the counterparts. This is a good example of how strategic communication has evolved from being functional to co-creational (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

A Co-Creational Approach

According to Botan and Taylor (2004) maybe the most significant trend in public relations is the shift from a functional to a co-creational perspective. The functional perspective rests on the interpretation that stakeholders and communication are means to organizational goals. On the other hand, the co-creational perspective rests on the perception that publics are “cocreators of meaning” (p. 652) and that communication is the function that

makes changes possible in the relationship between organizations and stakeholders. In comparison with the functional perspective, the co-creational perspective puts relationships first and does not perceive stakeholders as a means to an end. Instead, they are seen as “partners in the meaning-making process” (p. 652). Botan and Taylor (2004) further argued co-creation is not a new phenomenon because they believed Ferguson’s (1984) request for relationships to be the midpoint for public relations scholars refers to co-creational approaches. Thus, research focused on organizational-public relationships, community theory, coorientation theory, accommodation theory, dialogue theory, and symmetrical/excellence theory should emphasize co-creational approaches (Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) suggested co-creation originates from the idea of participatory product innovation. They described the concept as partners who aim to collectively create value by interacting, learning, integrating resources, and sharing information. Other scholars have defined co-creation as a practice “when the audience becomes especially active and begins to produce things of value (either to themselves or to others)” (Bruns, 2008; Cova, Dalli, & Zwick, 2011; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008, Prahalad & Ramaswamy 2004; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Schau, Muniz Jr, & Arnould, 2009; Toffler, 1980 cited in Humphreys, 2016, p. 64). Ji et al. (2017) in turn defined co-creation as “two entities are jointly co-managing relationships and constructing meanings to reach mutually beneficial agreements and goals” (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2014 cited in Ji et al. 2017, p. 203). Scholars have referred to co-creation as co-production, social production, produsage etc. (Humphreys, 2006; Payne, Storbacka, & Frow, 2008).

The four building blocks of co-creation have been identified as dialogue, access, transparency, and risk (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). For co-creation to occur

organizations can engage in dialogue with stakeholders. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) described, it is more than just about listening to stakeholders; organizations have to convey empathic understanding and recognize “the emotional, social, and cultural context of experiences” (p. 23). The second building block of co-creation is access. This means stakeholders do not have the need for ownership, rather they have a desire to get access to experiences. For instance, by leasing a car it gives customers the opportunity to experience the lifestyle of a car owner without having the responsibilities as an owner. Transparency includes information symmetry. Formerly, organizations benefited from having greater knowledge than stakeholders, but due to more accessible information about products and technologies it has become desirable to be transparent. This means information about products and technologies is known to both organizations and stakeholders. The last building block of co-creation is risk and refers to an emerging disclosure of the risk aspect between organizations and stakeholders. For example, engaging in a dialogue about the benefits and risks of using a product may create increased trust between an organization and its stakeholders.

Sometimes co-creation occurs when stakeholders become co-creators in the process of brand meaning (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Other times companies and its stakeholders function as partners in the process of product innovation. Such a co-creational process contributes to increased performance and relevance, but also lower research and development costs since companies are able to meet consumers’ needs via collaboration (Thomke & von Hippel, 2002; Henry & Kevin, 2007; Fuchs & Schreier, 2011). In the virtual environment, this process not only include stakeholders’ desires, needs, and opinions, but also their problem-solving skills and creativity which means they become co-creators (Füller, 2010). Stakeholders may create things of value by themselves, in collaboration with others,

or together with a company (Humpreys, 2006). For instance, Swarovski launched a design contest that encouraged consumers to share creative watch designs. As a result, the best design was presented at the world's largest watch fair and later it was put into production (Füller et al., 2011). Some may refer to this kind of co-creation as a way for organizations to exploit individuals' skills and creativity with the purpose of creating value (Ind & Coates, 2013). However, it is not only organizations who benefit from co-creation since scholars have argued stakeholders also experience gains from these processes.

The Value of Co-Creation

As mentioned earlier co-creation exists in two different forms: co-creation of product innovation and co-creation of brand meaning. In the following paragraphs it will be explained what value that is related to these processes both from a stakeholder viewpoint and organizational perspective.

Co-Creation as the Process of Product Innovation

Research have provided evidence of the Internet as a powerful way to engage with stakeholders regarding product innovation (Sawhney et al., 2005). Often, when referred to as virtual co-creation, it includes online platforms designed for co-creational purposes (Füller et al., 2011; Sawhney et al., 2005) such as designboom.com, innovation-community.de, crowdspring.com, and an online design service named FutureFactories that asks the public to engage with their design ideas (Füller et al., 2011). One reason why stakeholders are interested in virtual co-creation is because they relate the process with something rewarding. It can be rewarding for consumers in the form of product improvement or the work itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Füller, 2007). This is because they may get delighted and absorbed in the work of generating ideas, testing and improving products when experiencing what

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) identified as ‘flow’. Another reason why stakeholders may choose to engage in virtual co-creation is because they engage, collaborate, and gain knowledge and feedback from other participants. They simply like engaging with like-minded participants and form relationships (Füller et al., 2011). Moreover, others engage because they are dissatisfied with existing products, curious, have interest in innovation, or for monetary rewards (Füller, 2010a). Research also revealed motivation among consumers is determined by their expectations for virtual co-creation activities, and the most creative consumers are more interested in such activities (Füller, 2010a). However, when organizations experience lack of interest in virtual co-creation activities it is because organizations unsuccessfully manage to design an experience participants find appealing (Füller et al., 2011).

Research also demonstrated how co-creation benefits organizations. Füller (2010b) was the first to examine how co-creational experiences among stakeholders affect the relationship consumers have with the organization and its products. Results showed in cases the consumer enjoyed the co-creational experience, it positively affects consumers’ relationship with the firm and product. It has also been examined increased loyalty towards the brand is a positive effect of consumer co-creation (Sawhney et al., 2005). Other positive effects include positive word of mouth (Bilgram, Bartl, & Biel, 2011; Piller, Ihl, & Vossen, 2010), and increased levels of trust (Füller, 2010b). In fact, organizational co-creation also impacts how a brand is authentically experienced by consumers who have not engaged in co-creational activities with the brand.

Co-Creation of Brand Meaning

Ind and Coates (2013) stated the concept co-creation has been used broadly to “describe a shift in thinking from the organization as a definer of value to a more participative process where people and organizations together generate and develop

meaning” (p. 86). Brand meaning is the outcome of discursive processes that involves stakeholders who interact with each other with the purpose of co-creating (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). Thus, the concept of creation is not solely about customer competence takeover and creating things, it is about interpretation and meaning making as “meaning making is always co-created” (Ind & Coates, 2013, p. 87).

Vallaster and von Wallpach (2013) conducted research that adds to the literature of corporate branding by examining corporate brand meaning co-created by stakeholder groups. They conceptualized the online process in which stakeholders co-create brand meaning from a linguistic, hermeneutic perspective. Results revealed three discursive strategies stakeholders pursue when co-creating brand meaning: offense, defense, and neutrality. Moreover, it was found stakeholders meet with other stakeholders of like mind and work towards a common goal, but also engage in dialogue with counterparts to negotiate and disseminate their perception of brand meaning.

Recently, research within co-creation has been extended to include several stakeholder groups rather than consumers only (Hatch & Schultz, 2010), and it is acknowledged how stakeholders have become active in the process of brand discourse and brand meaning co-creation (Ind & Coates, 2013; Merz, Yi, & Vargo, 2009; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009). As a result of stakeholders’ involvement in co-creation of the brand meaning, stakeholders are “given and take control of brand meaning and ultimately the value(s) it brings to the organization” (Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 603). Yet, what value this brings to organizations needs to be further examined. This study addresses co-creation as a result of knowledge and engagement; “the idea of co-creation moves away from a managerially dominated focus on the often nebulous idea of value to a view that instead focuses on how individuals can collaborate with each other to meet their needs for

socialization and meaning making and how organizations can influence and use the insights of co-creation from a position of equality rather than dominance” (Ind & Coates, 2013, p. 92).

Co-creation rests on value creation for both stakeholders and organizations. However, the key question is how co-creational processes contribute to organizational legitimacy as a valuable outcome for the organization. The purpose of this study is to contribute to a framework of co-creation by examining the concept from an online-public relations perspective that looks further into the value that emerges in co-creational processes between organizations and stakeholders. More specifically, this study aims to study when co-creational processes become valuable as legitimacy to organizations by answering the three following research questions:

RQ1: How are social media managers using co-creation?

RQ2: What value do social media managers see in co-creation?

RQ3: How do social media managers evaluate co-creation?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This study focused specifically on co-creation of brand meaning from an organizational perspective and examined to what degree organizations engaged in co-creation with stakeholders, what value organizations gained from co-creational processes, and to what degree they reflected on these processes. In order to further examine these research questions, a qualitative methodology was pursued. By conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews with digital communication professionals from a variety of companies the researcher was able to understand their use of social media platforms and their perception of value from engaging with stakeholders in co-creation. The researcher examined the transcribed data by doing a thematic analysis to identify any emerging themes. This section continues describing the in-depth interviews, the sample of participants, the procedure of how the interviews were conducted, and the data analysis.

In-Depth Interviews

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted because it was relevant to understand the participants' perception of value if and when interacting with their stakeholders via co-creation. The participants' background and experiences were essential to the researcher and how the researcher interpreted their realities. Therefore, it was important to illuminate via interviews what kind of opinions the participants experienced during the interview and relate these to value co-creation from an organizational perspective with the purpose of being able to determine if the participants experienced any value when engaging in co-creation with stakeholders, and when this value occurred in the process.

To assure the quality of the interviews and the consistency between interviews an interview guide (Appendix A) was prepared. Although the main focus was on keeping the

participant centered during the interview, this interview guide also allowed a structured and consistent process across all interviews. The interview guide consisted of 11 questions and was divided into three sections. Each of these sections pertained to one of the three research questions. As the purpose of these interviews was to understand participants' reality, it was important that the researcher was able to go more in-depth with specific topics they pointed out to further explore the perception of the participants' reality and to ask relevant follow-up questions.

Prior to this study a pilot study was conducted of the same topic that enabled the researcher to go through the whole process step by step. By conducting a pilot study, the researcher got aware of different aspects of the research that needed to be adjusted and improved. For example, semi-structured in-depth interviews with two social media managers were conducted. Based on these interviews the researcher realized a need for re-evaluating the interview guide since the participants did not provide the information the researcher was looking for.

Sample of Participants

The participants (n=13) were digital communication professionals who managed social media for an organization located in the United States whereas most of these (n=11) were located in the Orlando area. The organizations for which the digital communication professionals managed social media accounts varied from non-profit organizations, communication agencies, and business organizations. In total, 14 digital communication professionals were interviewed whereas 13 of the interviews were used during the analysis. They ranged in age from 23 to 34 years old and two of the 13 participants identified themselves as males. Participants were recruited via purposive sampling, however, it was required they worked for an organization with a social media presence, and that the

organization operated within a business-to-consumer industry since this study focused on co-creation aspects with a variety of stakeholders.

Procedure

Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher applied to the University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board to get acceptance to conduct all of the interviews (see Appendix B for approval). Before the interviews participants were provided with information including a short description of the research, their rights as a participant, that all information would be managed confidentially, and that the interview was being audio recorded (see Appendix C for consent form). Additionally, participants were asked to fill out few demographic questions via email. To make the process of the interviews consistent they were all conducted via phone. Before the interviews, all participants gave informed consent. Approaching this study via a qualitative methodology, it was expected the researcher would become a major part of the process. Not only was the researcher a part of the conversation with participants, the researcher also had the ability to manage the flow of the conversation (King & Horrocks, 2010). Each of the questions included in the interview guide were utilized during all interviews. A variety of appropriate follow-up questions were asked to show understanding and be reflective in order to conduct successful interviews to best possibly understand how the participants' experienced value in co-creational processes. The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 55 minutes.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed with an emphasis on the words expressed. This means all verbal communication was transcribed in terms of articulated words. Non-verbal communication such as tone and pitch were not the focus for this study which is why such

features were disregarded in the transcriptions. Based on the transcription, a thematic analysis was performed that enabled the researcher to analyze the data for any emerging themes (Owen, 1984). Themes were developed based on open coding and axial coding. The first process consisted of open coding where codes were identified by a reflection of the interviews and the use of descriptive coding, in vivo coding, process coding, and simultaneous coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) while each of the three research questions were maintained as the center of the analysis. Some parts of the data were coded line-by-line and in case the line did not consist of a complete sentence it was coded segment-by-segment to capture the broader meaning. The second process, axial coding, was employed to understand the meaning of the most frequently occurring codes and to see possible relationships between them.

Thus, by applying the two criteria recurrence and repetition proposed by Owen (1984) several themes started to emerge. For instance, recurring and repeated codes such as “getting real time feedback”, “providing real time information”, “trying to act like real people”, “there is a human on the other side”, “making sure stakeholders feel heard”, and “listening to stakeholders” constituted the theme *humanizing social media*. This is because it was possible to see a relationship between these codes as they all relate to how the participants explained they applied human attributes on social media in an effort to make social media as human as possible. This approach was used for identifying all eight themes. Additionally, by applying a constant comparative method, the researcher ensured the themes were compatible with the answers provided by the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

This research aimed to examine whether co-creational processes became valuable for organizations. To examine the data a thematic analysis was employed as a means to analyze emerging themes. The themes that emerged based on the data were typical social media interactions, co-creation of brand meaning, co-creation as a means to reach organizational goals, humanizing social media, the value of typical social media interaction, the value of online co-creation of brand meaning, measuring social media in general, and measuring co-creation which will be described in depth below. Only the most significant examples from participants were included in the analysis to make claims for the identified themes. This study revolved around the participants and organizations emphasized in Appendix D, and the purpose of providing a description of these organizations was to be able to understand why the participants provided certain responses based on their organizational background.

The use of Co-Creation

RQ1 asked how social media managers use co-creation. In order to answer this research question the first part of the interview focused on how participants typically interacted with their stakeholders on social media. Across the interviews the two following themes emerged: typical social media interactions and co-creation of brand meaning. This research investigated co-creation as a specific type of stakeholder interaction. However, it was still important to emphasize the typical interactions digital communication professionals had with their stakeholder to know the difference between typical social media interactions with stakeholders, and thereby understand when the co-creational processes occurred and what value these specifically brought to the organizations.

Theme 1: Typical Social Media Interactions

At some point during the interviews all participants stressed the importance of interacting with their stakeholders to certain degrees. A variety of researchers have explained how organizations continue to embrace one-way communication on social media when it comes to communicating with stakeholders online (Fieseler et al., 2010; Kent, & Taylor, 2016; Lewis, 2003; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). However, the participants demonstrated how social media provided excellent opportunities for interacting with stakeholders. All participants utilized social media to interact with stakeholders, but it was clearly emphasized how they ascribed different meanings to what it means to interact with stakeholders since they perceived interaction to be everything from a “like” from stakeholders to stakeholders commenting on posts and asking questions. When the business owner and manager of a small business organization was asked to describe the typical interactions she had with stakeholders on social media she responded:

“So a typical interaction would be someone liking a photo and a step above that would be someone commenting usually tagging their friend to see the photo or ask a question about the product.”

Based on this example it was possible to see the business owner and manager of a small business organizations perceived stakeholder interaction to vary in different degrees on social media. Another participant, the public information officer of a small non-profit organization, said the typical interactions she had with stakeholders on social media were when they commented a post:

“Sometimes people comment on posts that we make, sometimes they're negative, sometimes they're positive.”

As implied by this example, the public information officer perceived a typical interaction to be someone commenting on a post. Even though the participants ascribed different meanings to what it means to interact with stakeholders there was a trend among them showing they favored being able to respond to stakeholders and rather embrace two-way communication (Fieseler et al., 2010). The partner and co-founder of a small web development agency commented:

“...we're pretty active in the comments system usually on platforms, we're big believers in responsiveness so we use messaging platforms, direct messages and respond to comments...”

As explained by this participant, it was emphasized how her organization believed in responding to stakeholders both via social media platforms but also direct messages. In addition, the marketing manager of a medium to large-sized resort supported this belief by saying:

“So we make it, I make it very important in a priority to be able to respond to every single person, and I think that the point of social is being social with the stakeholders and being social with the people who are interacting with you.”

This demonstrated that participants had a desire to interact with stakeholders but whether or not this interaction evolved from interaction to become a real dialogue depend on some specific factors. As Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) stated there are four building blocks of co-creation whereas one of these is dialogue. Since the dialogic aspect was the focus of how co-creation occurred in this study, dialogue was the building block that were focused on in the analysis. For dialogue to occur organizations have to show empathic understanding and recognize “the emotional, social, and cultural context of experiences” (p.

23). Some of the participants directly stated that they engaged in dialogue with stakeholders.

The digital communications editor of a large non-profit organization commented:

“We are of course getting engagements on our post. They will tag friends if it is pictures from an event, but for the most part that's kind of the main communication we have with them, the one-on-one feedback that we get via private messages.”

This example demonstrated that the large non-profit organization engaged in one-on-one feedback on social media via private or direct messages indicating that this particular organization engaged in dialogue with stakeholders. Another participant, the marketing manager of a medium to large-sized resort also explained with her own words that they engaged in a dialogue with their stakeholders when she said:

“So in terms of engagement, we are having a dialogue. It's not just a one-way conversation.”

This example indicated that the marketing manager of a medium to large-sized resort was aware of what a dialogue is because as she said they were not just having a one-way conversation with their stakeholders. Since the participants indicated their organizations responded to stakeholders on social media, and sometimes via private venues, it is certain that two-way communication occurred. However, to be able to understand whether or not the participants actually engaged in a real dialogue with their stakeholders it was important to take a further look at how the examples provided by participants specifically demonstrated how they reacted to stakeholders who wanted to interact with them on their social media platforms.

Theme 2: Co-Creation of Brand Meaning

After participants were asked to describe the typical online interactions they had with stakeholders they were asked whether they actively tried to interact with stakeholders on

social media to understand if they as an organization made an effort to take initiative to start a conversation which is essential for dialogue to occur. The majority of the participants expressed they actively sought to engage with stakeholders and that they did so by posting content that was engaging in nature. For example, by asking questions or asking stakeholders to participate in contests. When the marketing and public relations manager for a medium-sized non-profit organization was asked if they encouraged stakeholders to actively communicate with them on social media she stated:

“Right now we are actually running contests where we're encouraging people to respond to a question to be able to win tickets, so it's not necessarily communication in a way that is, what would the word be ... It's not communication like we are going to respond and go back and forth, but we are encouraging them to engage with us by thinking and typing a comment.”

By this example it can be argued that the organization made an effort to directly communicate with their stakeholders since they posted a contest where people were able to participate if they directly responded to a question. This way stakeholders were specifically encouraged to actively communicate with the organization. However, what is noticeable about this comment is that the marketing and public relations manager indicated in the end that they did not engage in a dialogue with their stakeholders. Another participant, the social media strategist of a small advertising agency supported to some degree what was expressed by the example above when she explained how they encouraged stakeholders to be active with them on social media:

“Just by asking questions, just by posting content that says “did you try this new product, what do you think of it?”, or even for the [client] that we have we say “we

appreciate your feedback, you help us do better, follow this link here and tell us how your recent experience was” or something like that.”

As exemplified above, this organization encouraged stakeholders to actively communicate with them by posting questions about products or posting questions about stakeholders’ experience. A third participant, the senior account executive for a small to medium-sized marketing and PR agency, specifically explained that her organization also used the strategy of asking questions and asking about stakeholders’ opinion when they tried to actively communicate with stakeholders:

“For [brand] for example I know we’ll ask a lot of questions on Twitter. They have Twitter polls and sometimes we’ll ask what their favorite flavor is if they’re in a specific limited time offering and ask for them to tell us.”

This example further demonstrated how the organization was interested in getting feedback from stakeholders by asking about stakeholders’ opinion of for example what their favorite flavor of a specific product was. In general, as these examples above portrayed, participants emphasized that they made an effort to interact with their stakeholders. Yet, as stressed by the marketing and public relations manager for a medium-sized non-profit organization, although they wanted to interact with stakeholders not all of them did it with the purpose of engaging in a dialogue. Why organizations made an effort to get the stakeholders to engage on social media even though they did not want to be a part of a back and forth conversation will be emphasized later in the analysis as this pertains to the value of interactions. The other examples provided above indicated that some of the other organizations engaged in a dialogue with their stakeholders in terms of dialogic engagement about feedback. In fact, two dimensions of co-creation of brand meaning were identified

when it comes to dialogue as the participants engaged in dialogue with their stakeholders about referrals and feedback.

Referrals

During the interviews few of the participants talked about how they experienced customers sharing pictures of the products they bought. They further explained if they saw a stakeholder was sharing a picture of their product on social media, they recognized that post for example by re-sharing it with their network or by sending them a thank you gift. This way they ended up recognizing the stakeholders that shouted them out on social media and they were also able to use these posts to reach out to other stakeholders and use them as referrals. The marketing director of a small business organization mentioned when his organization realized a stakeholder tagged them in a post they would note it internally and send a gift. He specifically said:

“They will post “oh we loved our stickers from [brand] check them out if you’re in need” and then we send them a little thank you card with a little glass and some candy in it, and a lot of times what happens is they will take a picture of that gift when they get it and then re-share it to their network ... Basically it’s taking your first referrals into super referrals because they were already excited about what they got.”

As the example indicated, the organization was reaching out to stakeholders to appreciate and recognize the fact that the stakeholder referred the organization to his or her network. In addition, by specifically sending that gift, it caused stakeholders to talk even more positively about the organization and shout them out a second time on social media. The fact that the marketing director of a small business organization described how they sent gifts to stakeholders when they saw a stakeholder positively talked about their organization on social media is in correspondence to what Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) referred to as

emphatic understanding by saying thank you. Additionally, the organization also recognized the stakeholder's social experience by doing so which is why it can be argued the organization engaged in dialogue. The business owner and manager of another small business organization supported the aspect of engaging with stakeholders on social media via referrals. She explained:

“My content is often user generated so people get their products and they take photos with it and share it with their friends and then I share that.”

This example demonstrated how the organization engaged with stakeholders via referrals when stakeholders shared a product they were satisfied about. By specifically sharing that post again as an organization showed how the organization valued that post and recognized the particular stakeholder who shared it in the first place.

Based on the example provided by the business owner and manager of the other small business organization it can be argued the organization engaged in a dialogue with stakeholders. This is because when the business owner and manager re-shared a post on social media by some of her customers it can be argued it signaled a thank you and therefore was showing emphatic understanding and recognized the customers' social experience.

Since dialogic engagement was reached it means that co-creation occurred which was also seen in these examples because the fact that the stakeholders digitally shouted out the organizations was perceived as a referral to other stakeholders by the organizations. In return the organizations appreciated and said thank you to the stakeholders, thus it became valuable for all parties. Yet, one of these examples did not display completely online co-creation since the marketing director of a small business organization did not talk about how they communicated with the stakeholders online, but instead how they reacted on the stakeholders' online engagement.

Feedback

Even though the minority of the participants expressed co-creation via referrals, the majority talked about how they engaged in co-creation via the feedback they received from stakeholders. To exemplify, participants talked about how their stakeholders posted positive and negative comments on social media and that they tried to take that feedback into consideration. The public information officer of a small to medium-sized non-profit organization was asked how she thought her organization took stakeholders' expectations and opinions into consideration and responded:

“We take them into consideration, because I mean we're a shelter we have to care about the citizens of [county]. So we pay a lot of attention to complaints and criticisms, and a lot of times we take them into consideration and then put them into place.”

Based on the example provided she indicated that it was important for her organization to take stakeholders expectations and opinions into consideration even though they received negative feedback in terms of complaints because they were able to listen to the negative feedback and change as an organization based on it. The public information officer continued explaining and brought up a specific example of how they incorporated stakeholder feedback in her organization:

“An example that I can think of is our shelter. The kennel was partially open air meaning half of it is outdoors and half of it is inside, but people in our community thought that it was wrong to have the dogs in the heat from the sun even though the kennel is basically up to standards by all of the shelter metrics. So anyway, due to pressure from our stakeholders much of which we heard on social media we actually ended up getting some air conditioning in the kennel and figuring out a way to a) put

that on our budget and b) make the air conditioning vent in such a way that we weren't just air conditioning the outside which would be pointless so rather we hired a contractor and figured out a way to lower the temperature within the kennel even though part of them are outdoors.”

This example specifically demonstrated that the organization took stakeholder feedback seriously and listened to the requests posted by stakeholders by lowering the temperature in the kennel in favor of the dogs even though the kennel adhered to all basic shelter standards. Another participant, the digital marketing manager of a small business organization, also provided an example of how her organization looked at the feedback from stakeholders and implemented the feedback in a meaningful way when she said:

“... I mean I think we kind of let the engagement direct those posts ... We'll post something on Instagram that maybe get 300 likes and a couple comments and then maybe a week later we'll post something that gets 3000 likes and 400 comments. So we'll try to look at trends like that and see what posts have been successful in the past.”

Although this type of feedback from stakeholders were more indirect, the example still demonstrated how the organization took into consideration what posts the stakeholders were engaging with the most with the purpose of adjusting future posts based on stakeholder preferences. Additionally, the marketing manager of a medium to large-sized resort explained how her organization felt compelled to act upon the stakeholder feedback they received when she said:

“We're undergoing a renovation right now because we know the hotel is older and our guests have told us that and we know we are not gonna catch the same audience if we don't do it.”

As stated by the marketing manager, they took stakeholder feedback seriously and listened to the feedback by renovating the resort which also would benefit both the resort and the stakeholders. Another participant, the social media strategist of a small advertising agency, further supported this theme by explaining how communicating with stakeholders enabled her organization to improve and adjust content on social media, and that they appreciated both positive and negative feedback:

“I would say we definitely appreciate the kind of feedback they can give us and the more they communicate with us the more we can use that kind of feedback to do better and cater, learn how to target better, and word our content better, so we definitely do encourage stakeholders to reach out whether it is for anything good or anything bad, so yeah it's definitely a conversation we want to have with our stakeholders.”

This example demonstrated that the organization appreciated both positive and negative feedback which enabled the organization to know what they were doing good and possible areas to improve which showed how considerate the organization was about stakeholder feedback. In general, what all these examples had in common was that they showed how the participants engaged in a dialogue with stakeholders. First and foremost, the organizations demonstrated empathic understanding in the way they made an effort to respond to the comments they received on social media whether they were positive or negative as exemplified earlier. Second, the organizations also recognized the emotional and social context of the experiences stakeholders had when they chose to take their feedback into consideration and either a) continued doing what the stakeholders were positively commenting on, or b) decided to change organizational operations based on the negative feedback from stakeholders. This type of dialogic engagement was just as compatible with

co-creation as referrals because it was assumed the interaction created value for the organizations when it came to knowing what they were doing right and what they were doing wrong. Moreover, it created value for stakeholders because the organizations listened to them and adapted to their requests. As it was argued from the examples provided by participants, organizations were engaging in co-creation. However, whether this kind of co-creation can be identified as co-creation of brand meaning will be discussed next.

As previously stated co-creation of brand meaning has only been ambiguously described and therefore is a concept that lacks a clear definition. According to Ind and Coates (2013) it is a process where organizations engage with people to create meaning. More specifically, the process is about meaning making and interpretation. Other scholars describe co-creation of brand meaning as a process where stakeholders are given more control and take more control of the brand meaning (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). Thus, this study takes the definition a step further and try to explain what co-creation of brand meaning really means.

The type of co-creation identified in this analysis may perhaps differ when it comes to arguing for the interactions of co-creation of brand meaning. Referrals can be argued as being co-creation of brand meaning since the stakeholders may add to the brand meaning of a particular organization by recommending them to other people. Hence, this may add to the brand meaning of that particular organization since other people are expressing what they think about the organization. Although referrals may be co-creational processes of brand meaning occurring between organizations and stakeholders, they do not really allow stakeholders to take control of the brand meaning in the same way as feedback. The examples provided by the participants above demonstrated that in cases organizations take feedback from stakeholders into consideration and specifically incorporate the feedback into their organization it has a more powerful effect on the brand meaning compared to referrals. This

is because when organizations implement such feedback they may directly affect the operational aspect of the organization and thereby change how the organization accomplish different activities. Additionally, organizations directly allow stakeholders to have a brand voice in terms of being able to contribute to the meaning of the brand.

Thus, it is possible to answer RQ1 that asked how social media managers are using co-creation. As these examples portrayed, it can be argued that co-creation of brand meaning was actually occurring among organizations and stakeholders on social media, and that digital communication professionals used co-creation in the form of referrals and feedback processes. Since digital communication professionals used co-creation in these different ways co-creation is likely to occur in varying degrees. Now that it has been argued co-creation of brand meaning occurred between organizations and stakeholders it is worth looking further into whether organizations did it with the purpose of accomplishing goals or whether they had a genuine interest in engaging with stakeholders in co-creation since another theme identified in the data may detract from the fact that genuine co-creation among the parties is occurring.

Theme 3: Co-Creation as a Means to Reach Organizational Goals

A theme identified in the data displayed how participants talked about co-creation of brand meaning as a way for their organization to better reach goals. In fact, two dimensions supported this overall theme in terms of goal-oriented communication and paid social media marketing.

Goal-Oriented Communication

The concept of co-creation rests on the idea of “two entities are jointly co-managing relationships and constructing meanings to reach mutually beneficial agreements and goals”

(Botan & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2014 cited in Ji et al., 2017, p. 203). For this reason, the parties who engages in co-creation are together aiming to create meaning from the interactions that should be beneficial for both parties. This means when an organization is selectively choosing to engage with specific stakeholders to achieve their own goals it goes against the construction of co-creation since it may not be beneficial for both the organization and stakeholders. For example, the participants talked about how they either adapted or responded to stakeholders with the purpose of achieving their own organizational goals which goes against the fact that genuine co-creation occurred because they may have been more interested in accomplishing their own goals rather than serving the needs for the general stakeholder groups. The partner and co-founder of a small web development agency said:

“... we often advise that people take stakeholder input seriously, but don't necessarily allow them to dictate the content calendar if it's contrary to the organization's goals in some way. It's worth listening and it's definitely worth responding, but it's something that we more often encourage people to take into their content making cycle, don't respond reactively unless there's some kind of donor related requirement.”

This example displayed that stakeholder feedback can be valuable to some degree, but in case it is taken into consideration it must corresponds with the goals of the organization.

Therefore, this example demonstrated another aspect of how co-creation may be used.

Another participant, the marketing manager of a medium to large-sized resort, explained how her organization appreciated feedback from stakeholders, but it was indicated in the example that they would only take the feedback into consideration if it benefited the organization:

“Our company takes our stakeholders opinions pretty seriously. Without our guests we're not a hotel, so when a guest provides us with feedback or concerns about how to make our hotel better and maybe why they had a bad experience, we do take it pretty

seriously ... But there are times when a guest overreacts or said something that we just don't agree with and we don't fix it because we know that's not gonna reward us. But if we have 20, 30, 40, 100 guests saying the same things it's something we're really gonna evaluate.”

As indicated by this example, the organization valued feedback from stakeholders because this feedback enabled them to improve stakeholders’ overall experience at the resort. However, it was noticeable the marketing manager emphasized how they sometimes only would take the feedback into consideration if it could reward the organization itself, or if several guests brought up the same issue. Although stakeholder feedback may be important for this organization, the example still indicated it was important to a certain extent if it was feedback that could be used to benefit the organization itself. The senior account executive for a small to medium-sized marketing and PR agency further supported this aspect when she said:

“I think it is once again kind of looking at that broader picture and making the most, okay this is the opinions and reactions, but also the things that have to be done, so kind of finding that balance between the two.”

As interpreted from this example, stakeholder feedback can be important in the way that it can be relevant to look at stakeholders’ opinions and how they react to certain things, but there are still other activities that has to be done from an organizational perspective which is why the organization are not able to solely listen to feedback from stakeholders. A third participant, the marketing manager of a small venue, brought up an example of co-creation of brand meaning, but in the end she emphasized how her organization was able to benefit from it in terms of reaching their own goal:

“... stakeholders or people on [college] would say “I would have loved to come to this show, but I didn't know that there was a show, I didn't see any of your advertising for it, I didn't see you posting about it online”, and that sucks to hear sometimes because you feel you put in so much effort, but then again it also helps us because then we are like, okay well what platforms are you on the most, what are you engaging in, and we'll take that feedback and post some more content on that so they can hopefully get the tickets and buy our shows.”

As seen from the examples above the participants talked about how they took stakeholder feedback into consideration and chose to react upon the feedback but with certain reservations. For example, the partner and co-founder of a small web development agency talked about advising clients not to actively respond to stakeholders unless their requests are donor related. The example that was brought up by the partner and co-founder was based on a non-profit organization, and as a non-profit organization, it is assumed that more often than not donors are important in terms of financial support and voluntariness which is why the goal often is to get more donors. Therefore, a question existed whether genuine co-creation of brand meaning was occurring if they engaged in co-creation only with the purpose of accomplishing their own goals. Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of taking the feedback into consideration if the feedback was in correspondence with the organizations' goals.

Paid Social Media Marketing

The second dimension is surrounded by what the participants talked about in regard to the use of paid social media content. What is important to emphasize here is the fact that organizations paid to reach even more people compared to when they used organic content which means the underlying motive for engaging with the stakeholders may not have been to

interact with stakeholders to reach co-creation of brand meaning but to disseminate their message to an even broader audience. The marketing manager of a medium to large-sized resort was asked what the main goals were for her organization to use social media and she said:

“Some of the main goals we have are brand awareness, really attracting new people to us, acquiring new customers, so bringing out that brand awareness, using targeted Facebook ads to promote any kinds of specials or promotion that we may have.”

This example demonstrated that the organization used paid social media to reach the right audience which may indicate that the goal for the organization was not to use social media with the purpose of engaging in co-creation with stakeholders, but instead to use social media as promotion platforms. The social media strategist of a small advertising agency further supported this aspect by stating:

“Sometimes we'll run an ad just to promote something for a day, sometimes we'll just do it for five or six days or sometimes we run ads for a month, and we do that because we want to reach decision makers who want to engage with our clients and determine how we can get them in local areas.”

As demonstrated by this example, the organization may to a higher degree have used social media to target the right audience, and thereby aimed to use social media as a promotion tool. Another participant, the marketing and public relations manager for a medium-sized non-profit organization, also brought up an example of how her organization used paid social media to target their audience when she commented:

“We do also do paid Facebook ads because the audience is really primed. We also do Instagram ads because those are the people we know we can target and we can be in control of those ads versus external ads that we do ...”

Based on these examples, were the organizations really interested in engaging in co-creation of brand meaning with the stakeholders, responding to their questions, and bringing the feedback from stakeholders back into the organization to make any changes, or were they just interested in responding stakeholders and to be able to say they would make improvements but never implemented those improvements. Despite the fact that these examples argued against the construction of genuine co-creation of brand meaning there are other reasons that argued for the construction of genuine co-creation of brand meaning.

Theme 4: Humanizing Social Media

A trend across the interviews that argued for the organizations being interested in engaging in co-creation of brand meaning with their stakeholders was clearly emphasized by how the participants put an effort in applying human attributes on social media and making the interactions with stakeholders as human as possible. This theme was based on the following three dimensions: portraying organization as real people, listening to stakeholders, and real time feedback.

Portraying Organization as Real People

Most participants put an emphasis on the importance of displaying to their stakeholders that they did not communicate with an organization on social media, but they actually communicated with real people who cared about them. As exemplified by the client services coordinator of a small digital marketing agency below, he put an emphasis on the fact that even though organizations are communicating with stakeholders on social media, stakeholders are still communicating with another person:

“But in the case of brands that are highly consumer based in shopping, and retail, and foods, even non-profits, yeah it is important because social media is kind of that

person to consumers and stakeholders, it is that person to person and touchpoint. They kind of feel they are talking to the brand.”

As further indicated by the client services coordinator, by communicating with stakeholder on social media it is possible the stakeholders get a feeling that they are actually “*talking to the brand*”. Additionally, the marketing and public relations manager for a medium-sized non-profit organization supported this aspect when she explained how they in her organization tried to apply a more humoristic touch to the conversations with stakeholders with the purpose of letting them know that they were communicating with real people:

“We try to be funny and use puns to just kind of stand out and engage with them and make them feel we are not just an organization, but we're individual people you can connect with.”

A third participant, the marketing manager of a small venue, stated a similar example when she said how they in her organization not only responded to all questions stated by stakeholders, but that they also made an effort liking and commenting on stakeholders’ posts so the stakeholders knew it was a real person they communicated with on social media:

“We answer all of their questions, even if there aren't questions we always like their comments or just doing some things like a little comment to let them know “hey, this isn't a robot putting out content”, we are here, we are trying to engage with you.”

As seen from these examples, the participants had a genuine interest in making the stakeholders realize that they were able to reach out and talk to the brand and make the stakeholders realize that even though they are an organization, it was real people they were talking with on social media.

Listening to Stakeholders

Portraying organizations as people were not the only human factor the participants applied to social media since they also emphasized the importance of making their stakeholders feel heard. While the senior account executive for a small to medium-sized marketing and PR agency was talking about some of the typical interactions she had with stakeholders on social media she said:

“You don't wanna be losing customers, so you want to make sure they feel that their voices have been heard and do what you can, and in most situations do right whatever wrong they feel have happened.”

This example implied that it was important for the organization to make sure their stakeholders felt heard when they were communicating with them on social media. As further interpreted from the example, the organization made the stakeholder feel heard by making an effort to change any negative experiences the stakeholders may have had. Another participant, the marketing manager of a small venue also emphasized the importance of listening to stakeholders when she explained:

“We always make sure that we send out an event survey. We always make sure that if anyone answers us, if anyone messages us on any of our platforms we will always respond immediately letting them know “we hear your concerns and let's figure out a way that we can help you”.”

This example also demonstrated this particular organization made an effort to respond to stakeholders no matter what to ensure they knew the organization was listening to what they were saying. In general, many of the participants pointed out that they wanted to make sure their stakeholders had the feeling of being listened to because they know in order for the

stakeholders to keep coming back they need to make the stakeholders feel important. If they do not respond to their stakeholders, they are more likely to stop following them.

Real Time Feedback

The last dimension that supported how human attributes were applied to social media by the participants was when they underlined how social media allowed them to respond to stakeholders in real time. The digital communications editor of a large non-profit organization was explaining that she thought short-term outcomes of interacting with stakeholders were similar to the long-term outcomes and emphasized how she experienced some stakeholders became surprised about how fast they received a response from the organization. The digital communications editor specifically commented:

“I think that I have seen it firsthand that they are actually surprised that there is somebody on the other side, and that they are happy that there is such a quick response.”

This example not only demonstrated that the digital communications editor experienced that stakeholders became surprised about getting real time feedback, but also that the stakeholders became surprised about the fact that real and caring people were communicating with them on social media which may be one reason why the organizations made an effort in applying these human attributes to social media. In addition, the marketing manager of a medium to large-sized resort was stating how she thought social media enabled her organization to provide stakeholders with real time feedback when she said:

“On social we're able to provide our guests with a much quicker response time to many of the questions that they have which is value and they see as value.”

It was assumed she further stated being able to provide real time feedback was valuable for her organization and stakeholders because being able to provide quick responses

to stakeholders' requests may be perceived as good customer service. When stakeholders are being provided with information they are looking for they may get satisfied which in the end benefit the organization if stakeholders think they experienced good customer service. The three dimensions displayed above provided examples showing how important it was for the participants to ascribe different kinds of human factors to social media. As the marketing manager of a medium to large-sized resort further said on social media they were able to create that "*authentic human experience*" for their stakeholders. In general, the organizations seemed to be aware that they communicated with their stakeholders via technology which is why the stakeholders would never be able to know whom they were talking with. Yet, since the organizations were aware of this they were trying to personalize the conversations by applying these attributes which again enabled them to personalize their brand. Furthermore, when they applied these three attributes it is possible it enhanced the stakeholders' perception of the organizations as being more credible and to become one of those organizations they knew they could trust.

Although it would be possible also to argue that these examples supported the organizations as just serving a customer service function, they to a higher degree supported the claim that they actually cared about their stakeholders and that they had a genuine desire to engage in a real dialogue with them. For this reason, it added to the fact that co-creation of brand meaning may not only have occurred based on organizational goals, but that it also may have occurred based on organizations' genuine interest in engaging with their stakeholders which argued for the construction of real co-creation of brand meaning. To get an even better understanding of why organizations may have chosen to engage in co-creation of brand meaning the study took a further look at the outcomes of such processes.

The Value of Co-Creation

Since previous arguments have supported the claim of co-creation of brand meaning among organizations and stakeholders it was essential to look further into what value these processes brought to the organizations. RQ2 asked what value social media managers see in co-creation which is why the second part of the interview guide included questions related to this topic. From these questions two overall themes emerged: the value of typical social media interactions and the value of online co-creation of brand meaning.

Theme 5: The Value of Typical Social Media Interactions

This theme referred to the outcomes of typical social media interactions, more specifically what kind of value organizations gained from online interactions with stakeholders. In the beginning of the analysis it was identified that not all organizations directly engaged in a dialogue with their stakeholders and that some of the participants explained how they still gained value from such interactions that did not reach the level of dialogue. Each of the participants talked about gaining different kinds of value from the more typical social media interactions such as brand trust, relationships, and stakeholder recognition, but the two most noteworthy values that was brought up across the participants were gaining more customers and being able to provide customer service.

Gaining More Customers

The first dimension was based on how some of the participants talked about they were able to gain more customers via those typical interactions on social media. The examples below explained how the participants experienced that the more active they were as an organization on social media or the more active their stakeholders were the more remarkable

they became in their stakeholders' mind. The public information officer from a small non-profit organization stated:

“But I would say that honestly the more that they're talking to us on Facebook the more engaged they are with [organization], and we want to establish ourselves as the primary adopting agency in central Florida so maybe they're not ready to adopt right again, but in the future they will be and they'll think of us.”

This example implied that by engaging with stakeholders on social media the organization thought it was able to make a good impression among stakeholders who were thinking about adopting an animal at some point in the future. Maybe it would not benefit the organization right away, but because the organization engaged with stakeholders it is possible the stakeholders would keep having a positive perception of it which is why it would perhaps benefit the organization later on when the stakeholders felt they were ready to adopt an animal. Another participant, the client services coordinator from a digital marketing agency also support this perspective when he expressed:

“The more that they see you being a voice on social the more they are thinking about you. So maybe after seeing your post for the 30th time they do decide to go to your page and then you get a customer from that ... So it's hard to say there is always going to be a realization point but the value is there.”

This example demonstrated that the client services coordinator thought an organization was able to become more noticeable in peoples' mind the more it communicated on social media and because it would become more noticeable in their mind it would maybe evoke interest among them and cause more to go the organization's website which they would benefit from in terms of more purchases. Additionally, both examples above showed that even though the organizations did not engage in a dialogue with their stakeholders they

did think they gained value from these interactions in the form of brand recall. Below is another dimension of the theme portraying how providing customer service also became valuable.

Providing Customer Service

Throughout the interviews almost all of the participants pointed out how social media enabled them to provide information to their stakeholders in the form of customer service and some of them further talked about this form of interaction became valuable for them. The marketing manager for a medium to large-sized resort explained how she thought it was valuable being able to answer questions posted by stakeholders:

“I don't think value is realized every time we comment on it, but we get a ton of questions about a ton of things about our hotel, room rate, details about rooms, what do we have, and we're able to provide them with answers without them having to jump over hoops and maybe call people and get put on automated services and track down.”

As interpreted by the example provided by the marketing manager, it especially created value for them because they were making the process easier for stakeholders when it came to finding the right information. The social media strategist from a small advertising agency also stated that it was valuable for her organization when she knew she was able to provide stakeholders with accurate information:

“I would say the value is realized when the stakeholders are either happy or satisfied with the kind of feedback we're giving them. I would say that when they're content with the information we're giving them or we're able to answer their question or lead them the right direction that definitely plays a huge role in making sure that the value is realized for the stakeholders.”

In fact, this example also demonstrated how it became valuable for stakeholders when the organization was able to provide them with useful information. As seen from the examples above, the participants thought they gained value from providing customer service to their stakeholders, so it became valuable for them when they could provide accurate information to a point where they knew the stakeholders were satisfied or happy with the information they received from the organization. What the two dimensions have in common is that value seems to be realized for the organizations when they thought the typical interactions became valuable for their stakeholders. Almost none of the participants were able to further specify at what point in the interaction it became valuable. However, as exemplified above few of the participants expressed that the realization point arose for the organization when the interaction became valuable for their stakeholders. When such interactions become valuable for stakeholders could be the topic for a whole different research and will not be further elaborated in this study. Now that it has been demonstrated how typical social media interactions became valuable for organization the next section will go in depth about what value organizations gained from engaging in co-creation of brand meaning with their stakeholders.

Theme 6: The Value of Online Co-Creation of Brand Meaning.

As Hatch and Schultz (2010) stated and as was illustrated by the first part of the analysis stakeholders are “given and take control of brand meaning and ultimately the value(s) it brings to the organization” (p. 603). What kind of value was gained from such processes so far remains ripe for investigation in the current literature which is why this part of the analysis aimed to approach what value organizations experienced when they co-created brand meaning. After talking with the participants about their social media interactions with stakeholders and how they encouraged them to become more actively engaged, they were

asked what kind of value they gained from these interactions. Sometimes the interactions they talked about were more typical in nature and the value of those interactions were explained above. Other times the participants pointed out dialogic engagement with stakeholders which in this study has been identified as co-creation of brand meaning. Based on those specific interactions it was possible to further narrow down what different values organizations gained from it. A total of four values were identified: being a resource for stakeholders, gaining brand advocates, reaching organizational goals, and organizational growth which will be described below.

Being a Resource

A dimension that emerged under this theme was how the participants became a resource for their stakeholders. They mentioned that the value of engaging in co-creation of brand meaning with their stakeholders was the fact that they became a resource for them, for example in terms of providing useful information. The digital communications editor for a large non-profit organization stated the following about the benefit for an organization when stakeholder expectations were taken into consideration:

“I think it shows that we are an organization of the public, I mean at the end of the day we cannot continue without them. It shows that their opinions are valued in their local government and that we want to show them that we are a resource for them.”

This example demonstrated that stakeholders were more than welcome to share both positive and negative opinions with the organization which may be the reason why the digital communications editor perceived her organization as being a resource. On the other hand, it can also be argued from this example that the organization used stakeholders as a resource because they used stakeholders’ opinions to act upon. Another participant, the marketing manager for a small venue supported this dimension when she stated:

“So we want to just be able to allow them to know that we are offering this show, it's here and that's truly the benefit.”

The marketing manager perceived it to be valuable when providing stakeholders with information and based on this example it was possible to argue that the organization functioned as a resource for stakeholders, for example when they wanted information about when different shows were scheduled. These examples demonstrated the participants were engaging in co-creation of brand meaning with stakeholders, and based on that interaction, they gained value when they felt they were providing the stakeholders with resources. This was beneficial to both stakeholders and the organizations. This dimension is overlapping with what was found as an outcome for organizations of typical social media interactions with stakeholders. Just as it was found previously, it became valuable for organizations when they knew the stakeholders were being provided with useful information. Another dimension that kept reoccurring in the data was gaining brand advocates.

Gaining Brand Advocates

Most of the participants emphasized how engaging in co-creation of brand meaning with stakeholders enabled them to build relationships with them which then enabled the stakeholders to turn into brand advocates, and sometimes this further enabled the organizations to make the stakeholders feel a sense of community. The associate director of social media for a large college was asked what short-term outcomes and long-term outcomes she experienced based on the interaction with stakeholders and commented:

“So I feel the long term is the most important because they become ambassadors for the college, and turning current students into graduates and alumni that are passionate about our brand ...”

As demonstrated by this example, the associate director of social media thought the value of engaging with stakeholders on social media was the fact that it enabled the organization to get brand ambassadors who were advocating for the organization. It can be argued this became valuable for both parties because it enabled brand ambassadors to share positive experiences about the organization, and it became valuable for the organization because stakeholders were advocating for them. Another participant, the marketing manager for a small venue, further supported this dimension when she said that engaging with stakeholders could get them to feel as they were part of the brand:

“Long term is that they not only engage with us on our platforms, follow us on our platforms, buy a ticket for our shows, but they also continue to buy tickets to our shows and continue to be a part of our [brand] family.”

It is possible that continuously engaging with stakeholders on social media would cause stakeholders to keep being interested in the brand which may lead to more purchases. Additionally, when stakeholders keep purchasing from the organization the marketing manager implied that the stakeholders could feel a sense of being a part of the brand which could become valuable for both the organization and stakeholders. It could be valuable for the organization because when stakeholders keep purchasing they may turn into brand advocates, and it could be valuable for the stakeholders because they keep getting good experiences with the brand. The business owner and manager for a small business organization also talked about she experienced gaining value when interacting with stakeholders on social media:

“A lot of my shirts are inside jokes that unless you live here you kind of wouldn't get, so I think the stakeholders get to feel they are a part of a little secret like a little community.”

As this example implied, when the business owner and manager engaged with stakeholders on social media she was able to engage with those stakeholders who were invested in the brand. Since many of her products were about inside jokes she was able to make the stakeholders feel a sense of being a part of the brand since they could identify with the jokes. What may not have been specifically expressed from these examples is the fact that all of them have in common that the participants mentioned those values of being long term outcomes of co-creation of brand meaning. For this reason, they may not have gained instant value of engaging in co-creation, but over time they were able to build relationships with their stakeholders which was valuable for them because they may turn into brand advocates (i.e. stakeholders who are in favor of and advocate for the brand). Moreover, when building a relationship it is possible the stakeholders also get to feel a sense of community (i.e. they feel they are a part of the brand) which can be important for the organizations to keep the stakeholders being interested in the brand. Additionally, an outcome pointed out by the participants was being able to reach the goals they set in their organization.

Reaching Organizational Goals

Based on the data it was possible to see that the participants experienced getting value out of co-creation of brand meaning in terms of being able to reach organizational goals. The outcomes are exemplified below by different participants. The digital marketing manager of a small business organization was asked what she thought was the benefit of adjusting social media content to stakeholders' expectations and said:

“We get increased engagement, we get increased following, we get more clicks to our website, we get more people buying products. I mean it's just better all around. We always wanna be posting content and improving the content that we are posting to make it, so that it's what the consumer wants.”

This example demonstrated that the organization was able to reach organizational goals by specifically adjusting social media content to stakeholder preferences. By doing so it is reasonable to believe the organization would get more stakeholders to follow their social media account which could lead to more stakeholders visiting their website which in the end could lead to more purchases. Another example demonstrating how co-creation of brand meaning could cause the organization to reach goals was stated by the manager for a small venue:

“Okay, we didn't get a lot of response for this show, let's figure out a different way that we can market this show but also reach the demographics that we want to reach.”

As interpreted by this example, if the organization did not specifically have as many stakeholders buying tickets to a show as expected they would go back and see what may have caused stakeholders not to buy tickets. For example, in terms of the content posted on social media. This way they could see if less stakeholders engaged with them via specific posts and based on that determine whether more or different content was needed to be posted about future shows to obtain the desired ticket sales. In general, it was seen by these examples how the participants explained they were able to use co-creation to accomplish organizational goals. By engaging with stakeholders in co-creation they were able to gain more purchases as well as reach their target audience. Moreover, this outcome may be similar to the outcome identified for typical social media interactions named “*gaining more customers*” as they both related to the organizational bottom lines in terms of revenue and or donations.

While the two previous dimensions for this theme included values that were serving the need for the stakeholders and the organizations, it was noticeable that this dimension only served the need for the organization. However, when looking at the themes from a bigger perspective it was possible to say that both being a resource for the stakeholders and getting

stakeholder brand advocates may at some point have led to organizational goals in the end. This being said, reaching organizational goals could also be identified as a long-term outcome for the organizations of co-creational processes of brand meaning with stakeholders. The last dimension of this theme is organizational growth and is explained below.

Organizational Growth

In the first part of the analysis it was found that most of the organizations engaged in co-creation of brand meaning with stakeholders via feedback. Furthermore, most of these participants stressed how this interaction with stakeholders enabled them to develop as an organization as they became knowledgeable about their stakeholders' desire and preferences which made it easier for them to anticipate what was important and relevant for them, for example, to post on social media in the future. The marketing manager for a medium to large-sized resort was asked what she thought was the benefit for her organization when they took stakeholders' expectations and opinions into consideration. She explained:

“I think we grow. I think growth is the key word in that answer. Without taking feedback and taking their opinions into consideration and execute some of those considerations you won't grow as a company, and you're gonna constantly get those complaints and then we're gonna lose guests ultimately.”

Based on this example it was demonstrated how the organization was able to grow, not by considering stakeholder feedback, but when the organization implemented this feedback. It was further implied that organizations, who do not listen to the feedback received from stakeholders, are not able to grow which may result in losing guests in the end. Another participant, the partner and co-founder of a small web development agency, was asked the same question and said:

“... it encourages them to get to know their audience better and to make fewer assumptions. I think when it works well it gives them much greater insight into who their stakeholders are and what they really want to hear. Social media is so full of noise anyway it's definitely beneficial to pay attention to the audience and think seriously about whether you're delivering and what they need. And if they're telling you what they need and you're not doing it, then there's really no excuse.”

This example further supported the dimension that the value of engaging with stakeholders in co-creation of brand meaning was the fact that the organization was able to get to know them even better, for example in terms of their preferences. When the organization knows what the stakeholders prefer they are able to adjust social media content based on these preferences. Again, this example also implied that in case organizations do not choose to use this information strategically to improve there is no excuse if they start to lose followers on social media ultimately.

These examples stressed that the organizations were able to grow because they took stakeholder input into consideration and incorporated it in their organization which was valuable for the organizations when it came to co-creation of brand meaning because it gave them an advantage of being able to better adapt to their environment. Since organizations were adapting to stakeholders' expectations and opinions they also gave stakeholders a brand voice which in turn made the organizations even more credible. All these elements together contributed to the overall development of the organizations which helped them improve their organization even more.

As this part of the analysis indicated, it was possible for organizations to gain value as a result of co-creational processes of brand meaning. Thus, to answer RQ2, organizations were able to benefit from co-creation in the form of being a resource for stakeholders,

gaining brand advocates, reaching organizational goals, and being able to develop as an organization. However, all of these values may not have been perceived as providing value for both stakeholders and organizations (e.g. reaching organizational goals). Ultimately, communicators will always first aim to reach their organizational goals in order to keep existing, but the organizations in this study did it in a way where stakeholders were really taken into consideration and were able to actually shape these goals in a future perspective. Therefore, the values that were gained were not only organizational driven but also stakeholder driven since these co-creational values benefited both parties. To gain more insight into co-creation of brand meaning it was important also to examine how organizations evaluate the co-creational processes of brand meaning they have with their stakeholders.

Evaluation of Co-Creation

The last research question (RQ3) asked how social media managers evaluate co-creation. For this reason, questions about how the participants measured co-creational processes of brand meaning were included in the interview guide. Among other things participants were asked how they measured the success of social media, but also whether they specifically measured the interactions they had with stakeholders to be able to understand the importance of evaluating co-creation and what it meant to the organizations. It was found that organizations aim to take stakeholders' expectations and opinions into consideration and thereby adapt to their environment as a form of co-creation of brand meaning. This gave more insight into organizational approaches in terms of how they may have incorporated stakeholder feedback. Two general themes emerged from the data: general social media measurement and the measurement of co-creation.

Theme 7: Measuring Social Media in General

A general trend among the participants showed how they all pointed out the importance of measuring their social media efforts which means they were evaluating, for example how much attention their different posts received. In fact, several of the participants mentioned that they were all about looking at the measures of social media indicating they found it important to understand their social media performance. Additionally, the stakeholders talked about how they used specific technology to measure this performance. The client services coordinator for a small digital marketing agency pointed out that an organization should always be evaluating its social media performance because social media is continuously developing:

“This is an ever-changing field so you always wanna take that data and analyze it to ensure that you’re keeping up ... It’s not like one day we will all wake up and having mastered social media because it’s always changing so you always wanna evaluate what you’re doing, evaluate what your consumers are saying, evaluate how the consumers are interacting with it, and consistently change based on those evaluations.”

Even though the client services coordinator talked about measuring social media in general, he emphasized the importance on changing based on the evaluations to be able to keep up with stakeholders since social media is a fast-developing field. Another participant, the associate director of social media of a large college, explained how she looked at the social media analytics:

“I do a pretty exhaustive monthly look at our analytics, each platform, looking at everything from the typical likes and comments to reach, impressions, engagement rate, looking at the audiences and how they shift from platforms each month.”

As implied by this example, the associate director of social media used technology to evaluate social media performance and compare each month to understand how her organization performed. Likewise, a third participant, the senior account executive of a small to medium-sized marketing and PR agency, mentioned the importance of using technology to assess social media performance when she said:

“Sprinkler has a reporting dashboard as well that we pull at the end of every month and compare how posts did and take a look at the different engagements and looking to see how many followers and things like that. So I think there are a lot of different ways of how you can try and measure the success of it, and also it's looking at what the goal of the company is.”

In addition, the example above also emphasized that assessing social media can be done in several ways and the way it is being measured may depend on the goals of the organization. Overall, these examples demonstrated organizations put an effort in measuring their performance on social media and compare these measures months to months to understand if they performed better or worse. Several participants expressed how social media constantly evolves, and by measuring stakeholder interactions they became knowledgeable about changes in preferences which again gave them an opportunity to change based on those measures to make sure what they were posting was relevant for their stakeholders.

In the previous section about what kind of value co-creation brought to the organization it was found that reaching goals was one of the outcomes of such processes. Likewise, organizational goals also seemed to influence what measures that became important to study for the organizations. For example, if it was important for the organization to increase the number of followers on social media, it was more important to look at the

numbers of new followers and the reason why they gained many or few followers based on the content posted compared to reach in terms of how many people were exposed to the content being posted. Although the data stressed the importance of measuring social media in general, the participants also explained the salience of evaluating co-creation of brand meaning.

Theme 8: Measuring Co-Creation

The data clearly showed trends across the interviews regarding measuring co-creation of brand meaning. Those participants who previously explained that they engaged in co-creation of brand meaning shared different opinions in terms of measuring co-creation on social media. However, they agreed that it was possible to measure the co-creational interactions with stakeholders to a certain extent but knowing how to specifically measure co-creation of brand meaning seemed like a more challenging task. The three dimensions of this theme include qualitative measures over quantitative, reporting co-creation, and the difficulty of measuring co-creation.

Qualitative Measures over Quantitative

Some of the participants stressed the importance of measuring the co-creational interactions qualitatively versus quantitatively by looking at the specific interactions they had with stakeholders as well as the feedback they received from them. They found it more useful compared to just looking at the numbers of the different metrics. The participants were asked whether or not they thought it was possible to measure co-creation of brand meaning and examples below show the responses provided by some of the participant. The digital communications editor of a large non-profit organization stated:

“We don't measure them in a quantitative type of way, we measure them in a qualitative type of way ... We are going to continue to do it because it is beneficial for us and for them.”

What is emphasized by the digital communications editor is that she measured co-creational processes qualitatively by looking at the content of the comments received from stakeholders and not at the number of comments received from them. This became valuable because the organization was able to assess each comment and take the feedback into consideration and determine if it was meaningful for the organization to implement any of the feedback. This way it also became valuable for the stakeholders because in case their feedback was implemented they felt heard and became that brand voice that added to the meaning of the brand. The digital marketing manager for a small business organization provided a specific example of how her organization specifically measured co-creation qualitatively which further supported the dimension:

“I think for us it's just, it comes down to positive feedback and positive engagement on our posts. We see a bunch of comments on our posts about how much they loved the shot of the products featured in the posts or how they wanna see more content like that.”

This example demonstrated that by looking at the comments from stakeholders the organization was able to see whether or not the stakeholders liked the posts which enabled them to adapt to their preferences and post more similar content. A third participant, the marketing manager for a small venue, also stated that measuring co-creation via qualitative approaches made the organization able to understand what kind of content their stakeholders wanted to see:

“I mean we definitely value qualitative over quantitative ... When I'm on social media and I see the great responses and I see that definitely not only helps us as a [venue], but helps us continue to serve the content that people want to see, so yes in that way it is measurable.”

These examples emphasized that some of the participants who engaged in co-creation of brand meaning with stakeholders looked more at the interactions from a qualitative perspective compared to the number of interactions because, as was found previously, when the organizations specifically looked at the content of these interactions they were able to take the feedback into consideration and adapt to the expectations of their stakeholders. Although around half of the participants stated that they were able to qualitatively identify co-creation, the other half found it difficult to know how to measure it.

Difficulty of Measuring Co-Creation

As stressed earlier, it can be difficult to define what co-creation of brand meaning is. This study has approached a clearer definition of the term but knowing how to measure this kind of interaction was challenging for some of the participants. The marketing manager for a medium to large-sized resort explained that she thought it was possible to measure co-creation via surveys and suggested some other ways to measure it as well:

“I don't think that there's a program that measures how valuable a response is unless you're actually providing surveys which we do not do on a social scale. I think it's really just gut. Are you providing valuable information, are you getting the information in a quick manner to them, whether it is entertaining or is informative, and how is that reaction. How was that response reacted to? Was it reacted to favorably or did they not like the response you provided to them.”

Even though this organization engaged in co-creation they did not measure the processes. However, as seen from the example the marketing manager was certain it could be measured via qualitative approaches. Likewise, another participant, the marketing and public relations manager for a medium-sized non-profit organization, also mentioned that her organization engaged in co-creation but that they did not specifically measure it:

“Quantifiably probably not. To a point we can definitely say if they review us and then we respond and then they respond to that. I can see pretty easily if they think they've been heard or if they feel they are gonna come back, but in general I can't track an individual user like that.”

What is similar about this example compared to first one is that this participant also indicated the fact that she thought co-creation could be measured qualitatively. Yet, she stated she was not able to track each stakeholder implying it is a process that may be time consuming. The social media strategist for a small marketing agency also expressed she did not measure co-creation, however, she agreed with the other participants since she thought it could be measured qualitatively:

“I mean I think that it can. I think that if you are seeing a document of positive feedback, negative feedback and what the topics were that it can be measured, but for the clients I'm working with right now it's not something that we directly measure, but I'm sure it can be done.”

As seen by these examples all of the participants had in common that they thought co-creation could be measured by the use of a qualitative approach. For example, the marketing manager for a medium to large-sized resort explained that she did not think it was possible to measure via a program indicating that being able to measure whether co-creation occurs or not is only possible for people to identify. This supported the first dimension of how the other

half of the participants measured co-creation qualitatively by going through and evaluating each of the stakeholder interactions. Moreover, those participants who measured co-creation also stressed the importance of reporting those interactions internally in the organization.

Reporting Co-Creation of Brand Meaning

To further understand the importance of measuring co-creation of brand meaning participants were asked whether or not they reported those interactions in their organization. In case of reporting co-creation, it signaled the importance to them of engaging in co-creation with stakeholders. Additionally, it indicated how genuine they were about having those interactions with stakeholders and that they did care about giving that brand voice to their stakeholders. The marketing and public relations manager for a medium-sized non-profit organization was asked how they in her organization incorporated feedback they received from stakeholders and she said:

“We just track it in a sheet internally and then there's an internal team meeting where we go over all of the reviews we get ... That's kind of were all of the different departments come together to talk about everything and get all of the departments opinion on it ...”

This example demonstrated that co-creational processes were reported internally and evaluated by looking at each review to discuss with other people in the organization whether or not some of the feedback should be taken into consideration. Another participant, the marketing manager for a medium to large-sized resort, was asked whether it was important in her organization to report co-creation and provided the following response:

“Oh yeah. We talk about that in the production meetings. So we talk about the good and the bad. How many comments we got on this, let's address this first, they are very long meetings.”

This example portrayed a similar approach in terms of how co-creation was reported by evaluating the feedback from stakeholders. The social media strategist for a small marketing agency also emphasized it was important for her organization to report co-creation internally. However, she did it in a report instead of reporting the processes verbally during a meeting:

“We always have a part at the end of the monthly report where we say these are some of the feedback portions we've received this month. So we always keep them updated throughout the month, but we like to iterate it again at the very end of the month and say these are some good feedback, these are some negative that we worked on and taking care of this month ...”

The reason why she reported co-creation in a report may be due the fact that this participant worked for an agency that managed social media communication for a client, and therefore may not have had the opportunity to meet with the client to report the information each month. However, as was also implied by this comment, she reported both negative and positive feedback enabling the client to understand what they were doing good and what they could possibly improve. All of the examples above portrayed organizations as they cared about taking the feedback from stakeholders seriously and that it meant something to the organizations to talk about those co-creational interactions internally. Even though many of the participants stated they took stakeholder feedback seriously, this indicated that they were incorporating the feedback either positively or negatively. If they received positive feedback it was an indication of they were doing well and that they should aim to continue in a similar manner in the future, but if it was negative feedback they were taking it into consideration by talking about what went wrong and how to improve prospectively.

Thus, to answer RQ3, the digital communication professionals were to some degree evaluating co-creation of brand meaning. Those who made an effort evaluating the processes were primarily doing it qualitatively whereas other digital communication professionals were finding it difficult to measure. However, they did think it was possible to assess via the use of qualitative approaches.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This discussion will be based on the findings from the analysis and will be discussed in regard to legitimacy theory presented in the literature review of this paper. Scholars argued there are positive effects of engaging with stakeholders in co-creation as the process of product innovation. For instance, these effects include stronger relationships between the parties as well as increased stakeholder loyalty and levels of trust (Füller, 2010b) which create value for organizations. Since current literature so far remains ripe for investigation when it comes to investigating legitimacy as an outcome of co-creation of brand meaning, this study examined when these virtual co-creational processes became valuable to organizations. More specifically, the purpose of this study was to understand how organizations use co-creation, what value they gain from it, and how they measure co-creation in general.

The preceding analysis offered thorough responses to these questions demonstrating organizations engaged in co-creational processes with stakeholders in varying degrees since they approached co-creation via different methods (i.e. via referrals and feedback) wherein they allowed stakeholders to contribute to brand meaning. By engaging in such deliberative processes organizations gained value in the form of being a resource, gaining brand advocates, reaching organizational goals, and being able to develop as an organization. Results also showed that those organizations who engaged in co-creation of brand meaning put an effort in measuring these processes qualitatively to continuously improve as an organization. Based on these results it is argued organizations not only benefit from co-creation as the process of product innovation but also from co-creation of brand meaning. Even more importantly is it that these results offered organizational legitimacy gains which is

why this discussion moves beyond the specific values organizations gained from these processes to discuss how the values serve as catalysts for legitimacy building.

Legitimacy as Co-Created Value

Previously in this paper, it was mentioned organizations must maintain legitimacy to secure survival in resource-competitive environments. Therefore, there is a need to adapt to these environmental changes in order to accommodate stakeholders' needs and expectations. Most public relations activities aim to establish and maintain legitimacy (Metzel, 2001) and as scholars suggested, engaging in dialogue is one way for organizations to gain legitimacy because through dialogue organizations can gain supporting and satisfied publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Kent and Taylor (2002) proposed five elements that underlie the dialogic concept and include mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment, described previously in this paper. Kent and Taylor (2016) further explored dialogue on social media and suggested in order to use social media dialogically organizations have to engage with stakeholders, recognize the value of others, and show empathy with stakeholders. In the following paragraphs, it is discussed how organizations fulfilled these online principles proposed by Kent and Taylor (2016) to be able to fully argue for online dialogic approaches among the organizations included in this study.

Dialogic Social Media

According to Kent and Taylor (2016) engagement with stakeholders means organizations must engage and interact with stakeholders on a one-on-one basis in a private venue. In this study engagement with stakeholders was reached based on how the participants stressed the importance of actively engaging with stakeholders by posting content that encouraged stakeholders to be active, for example in the form of asking questions or

launching a contest. They further stressed the importance of prioritizing responding to stakeholders regardless of whether the comments were positive or negative. During the interviews, the researcher did not go into specifics in terms of how the digital communication professionals responded stakeholders. However, some of them did emphasize they directed stakeholders to communicate via private message functions on social media.

Recognize the value of others is based on serving the need for publics and not only the organization itself. For instance, Kent and Taylor (2016) explained that the organization Chevron was able to maintain a website that provided helpful links to publics such as how to clean oil from clothes, and how to implement sustainable energy. In other words, it can be referred to as providing customer service. In this study, two of the emerging themes were: “*providing customer service*” and “*being a resource*”. These dimensions indicated that organizations perceived it to be valuable when they were able to provide stakeholders with relevant and accurate information to a point where they knew the stakeholders were satisfied or happy with the information they received. Thus, the organizations aimed to serve the need for their stakeholders and not only themselves.

Showing empathy with stakeholders is the last principle proposed by Kent and Taylor (2016). It is about understanding other individuals from their point of view. This means organizations must communicate with publics by being open minded and value other individuals’ opinions and ideas. As mentioned above, it was emphasized by most of the participants in the study how they always wanted to respond to comments from stakeholders in terms of feedback or queries. The participants expressed the purpose of doing so was to make sure the stakeholders felt heard. Additionally, most participants also demonstrated how they made an effort to showing empathy with stakeholders by taking their feedback into consideration, whether it was positive or negative. If it was positive, it indicated the

stakeholders were in favor of what the organization was already doing, which is why the organization could consider continuing what they were currently doing. If it was negative, stakeholders were unsatisfied which is why the organization could contemplate changing organizational operations or policies.

As the paragraphs above demonstrated, the organizations in this study fulfilled all three online dialogic principles. For this reason, it is possible to argue they engaged in dialogue with their stakeholders which was also found previously in the analysis. Since the organizations engage in dialogue with their stakeholders on social media, it means they are able to gain supporting and satisfied publics and thereby gain legitimacy (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, organizational legitimacy can also be gained by applying the three strategies introduced by Scherer et al. (2013) termed as strategic manipulation, isomorphic adaptation, and moral reasoning (Scherer et al., 2013).

Moral Legitimacy

This research focused on two-way communication in terms of dialogue and co-creation. Therefore, strategic manipulation and isomorphic adaptation, that aim for pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy respectively, are not considered. This is because these types of organizational legitimacy are gained via one-way communication. Instead, moral reasoning will be discussed as it aims for moral legitimacy via two-way communication processes. The moral reasoning strategy rests on a deliberation process and that organizations interact in an open dialogue with stakeholders with the purpose of justifying its behavior and current situation (Scherer et al., 2013). In fact, Castello et al. (2016) further developed this framework and investigated that organizations can gain moral legitimacy via the strategy they referred to as the networked legitimacy strategy. They argued legitimacy can be gained via

this strategy by reducing control over engagement, building dialogue with stakeholders, and recognizing the value of several publics.

According to Castello et al. (2016) organizations reduce control over engagement by adapting to the cultural structure on social media, for instance, by applying an informal tone when responding to stakeholders, personalizing the conversations, and immediately responding to comments. One of the themes from the analysis exactly reflected this approach. The theme "*humanizing social media*" demonstrated that it was important for most of the participants to display to their stakeholders that they did not communicate with an organization on social media, but they actually communicated with real people who cared about them. The theme also demonstrated that the participants made an effort to listen to stakeholders and made them feel heard because they knew in order for the stakeholders to keep coming back they needed to make the stakeholders feel important. The last aspect portrayed in this theme was real time feedback. Participants emphasized how social media enabled them to instantly reply to stakeholders.

Building dialogue and recognize the value of publics are somehow overlapping in meaning. Dialogue rests on the idea that organizations should consider posting content that is open ended and directly invite responses from publics, and recognizing the value of others is about accepting that sometimes the publics sets the agenda on social media instead of the organization itself (Castello et al., 2016). As it was discussed above, most organizations included in this study engaged in a dialogue with stakeholders, and the participants also emphasized how they actively encouraged stakeholders to communicate with them by posting content that was engaging in nature. For instance, by asking questions or asking stakeholders to participate in contests. Moreover, results showed that the theme "*co-creation of brand meaning*" and the dimension "*organizational growth*" from the theme "*the value of co-*

creation of brand meaning” illuminated how organizations let the stakeholders set the agenda by contributing with brand meaning via feedback processes. Via co-creation of brand meaning the organizations were able to act on the feedback they received from stakeholders whether positive or negative. If the feedback were positive, it signaled they could continue doing what they were already doing. If the feedback were negative they could decide to act upon it and change organizational operations or policies.

Since organizations seemed to fulfill the requirements for a networked legitimacy strategy it further supported the argument that the organizations in this study were able to gain legitimacy in the form of moral legitimacy. Although it could be argued organizations in this study prepared the ground for moral legitimacy, it is possible they also gained actional legitimacy.

Actional Legitimacy

According to Boyd (2000) actional legitimacy is based on daily public relations activities enabling publics to become directly involved in organizational decision-making. Boyd (2000) and Motion (2005) argued that power structures can take place in such legitimization processes. From the analysis it can be argued actional legitimacy was taking place and that power structures emerged both from a stakeholder and organizational stand point. Boyd (2000) stated that implementing specific actions in order to gain legitimacy can be translated into the use of power because organizations get stakeholders to achieve a certain perception of the organization based on this implementation. As found in the analysis, the participants explained how they implemented specific actions based on stakeholder feedback that occurred via co-creational processes of brand meaning. One participant, the public information officer of a small to medium-sized non-profit organization, provided a very

specific example in terms of how the organization she is working for implemented an action based on the feedback they received from stakeholders.

“An example that I can think of is our shelter. The kennel was partially open air meaning half of it is outdoors and half of it is inside, but people in our community thought that it was wrong to have the dogs in the heat from the sun even though the kennel is basically up to standards by all of the shelter metrics. So anyway, due to pressure from our stakeholders much of which we heard on social media we actually ended up getting some air conditioning in the kennel and figuring out a way to a) put that on our budget and b) make the air conditioning vent in such a way that we weren't just air conditioning the outside which would be pointless so rather we hired a contractor and figured out a way to lower the temperature within the kennel even though part of them are outdoors.”

Through this example it was possible to identify power structure from a stakeholder perspective since the pressure from stakeholders made the organization act upon it and implemented air conditioning in the kennel. On the other hand, power structure from an organizational perspective was also illuminated since the particular organization from the example listened to stakeholder opinions and chose to change organizational procedures which was assumed positively affected stakeholders' perception of the organization. Despite power structures, this example also demonstrated how the organization prepared the ground for actional legitimacy to occur since stakeholders became directly involved in the organizational decision-making.

As discussed in this paper, results argued for the fact that organizations engaged in dialogue on social media by engaging with stakeholders, recognizing the value of others, and showing empathy with stakeholders. By reducing control over engagement, building dialogue

with stakeholders, and recognizing the value of several stakeholders, organizations applied the networked legitimacy strategy. Additionally, organizations allowed stakeholders to become directly involved with organizational decision-making. All these approaches were reflected by co-creational processes and thereby demonstrated the relationship between co-creation of brand meaning and legitimacy building. Thus, legitimacy can be argued to emerge as co-created value. Since a possible relationship exists between the two concepts, it will be explained next what practical implications that follows.

Practical Implications

Legitimacy is important for every organization in order to be able to continue its existence, which is why all organizations must aim for legitimacy. The term legitimacy is defined as an organization's ability to respond to expectations as well as normative, cultural, and changing conditions (Deephouse & Carter, 2005). This study has demonstrated that digital communication professionals use social media to co-create brand meaning in specific ways, to include dialogic communication tenets. This lends itself to organizational legitimacy. Because stakeholders tend to actively share their positive and negative opinions about organizations on social media it supports the fact that stakeholders have developed from passive to active receivers of information (Dellarocas, 2003; Etter, 2013; Gaither & Austin, 2016; Lee et al., 2013). However, in order for an organization to engage in co-creation of brand meaning the organization must engage with its stakeholders in a dialogue. It specifically engages in a dialogue on social media by prioritizing responding to stakeholders on social media and thereby engage with them, recognizing the value of their stakeholders, and showing empathy with them. In addition, they must take stakeholder feedback into consideration and implement this feedback in the organization in a meaningful way to adapt to stakeholders' expectations.

For feedback to be implemented in the organization in a meaningful way, it requires that employees who engage in co-creational processes with stakeholders have access to organizational decision makers. For this reason, it is important that the co-creational processes in terms of feedback get reported internally with the purpose of passing on stakeholder feedback to employees that have decision-making power within the organization. However, it is possible choosing what compliments or complaints to distribute internally may differ among employees as there may be a threshold where the feedback becomes personal or programmatic.

By engaging in co-creation of brand meaning the organization allows stakeholders to have a meaningful brand voice where stakeholders are “given and take control of brand meaning and ultimately the value(s) it brings to the organization” (Hatch & Schultz, 2010, p. 603) because the organization adapts to the social context where they operate. If the organization continually engage in co-creation of brand meaning these processes also allow the organization to continuously adapt to normative, cultural, and changing conditions among stakeholders as the organization is able to keep up with stakeholders’ expectations through co-creation of brand meaning. As a result, these processes allow the organization to gain organizational legitimacy. However, in order for the organization to keep gaining legitimacy in the long run, the organization must continue engaging in co-creation of brand meaning with the active stakeholders on social media and keep taking their feedback seriously. Thus, the organization must keep following the process described above (see Appendix E).

Furthermore, in case the organization do not actively seek feedback from stakeholders by asking them to fill out surveys, it is suggested the organization considers assessing social media qualitatively instead of quantitatively. Not only does this enable the organization to understand the quality of the interactions with stakeholders, but it also allows the

organization to keep track of the content written in the comments by stakeholders as these may contain positive or negative feedback. In fact, by doing so it may potentially violate the expectations of big data. Results of this research provided tangible behaviors related to the co-creational processes, and the themes identified in this research may be used for further theory building and potential scale building.

Limitations

It is important to emphasize several methodological limitations in regard to this study as it is possible these may have affected the results in one way or another. These include sampling of participants, generalizability of the study, quality of interview recordings, and the possibility that the researcher may have misinterpreted data. When recruiting participants, the researcher aimed to find participants working for small to medium-sized organizations as well as organizations mainly operating as business-to-consumer versus business-to-business. Small to medium-sized organizations were aimed for because most research within communication practices revolve around large organizations. In this study, two of the recruited participants work for larger organizations whereas rest of them are employed in small to medium-sized organizations. Since only two participants work for larger organizations it may not directly affect the findings, but it is important to emphasize as a possibility. The researcher also aimed for recruiting participants working primarily in the business-to-consumer industry, however, one participant conveyed the organization he was working for as being more business-to-business focused. Additionally, the participants included in this study are generally digital communication professionals and not solely social media managers as the research questions were originally based on. Some of the participants may manage other areas than online stakeholder communication due to the size of the smaller

organization, but since they are managing the organization's social media accounts they are still assumed to be experts in this field and thus relevant for this study.

The methodology used in this research is qualitative and was based on information gathered from 13 participants which is why the generalizability of the results may be limited. However, since this study was exploratory in nature the purpose was not to generalize based on the findings, but rather explore what value organizations gain from co-creational processes. Another limitation in this study is the quality of the audio recordings. All interviews were conducted by phone and audio recorded on a technological device. Due to bad reception or background noise it was not possible for the researcher to fully transcribe all interviews since it was impossible to identify every word being said by the participants. This means the data are close to being complete and those sentences including words that were impossible to identify were disregarded in the study. The last limitation is based on how qualitative researchers play a big role in the analysis since they make sense of and interpret the gathered empirical data. Although the researcher transcribed the audio recordings in detail and examined all data closely, there is a possibility that the researcher of this study may have misinterpreted some parts of it. However, every effort was made to diminish such misinterpretations.

Future Research

This was an exploratory study that examined co-creation of brand meaning and the value of it from a broader perspective. It contributes to the literature of co-creation of brand meaning in terms of understanding different ways in which organizations engage in co-creation of brand meaning with stakeholders. Moreover, it also contributes to legitimacy literature in the way it enables to connect legitimacy as an outcome of co-creational processes of brand meaning.

This study is mainly based on co-creation of brand meaning among small to medium-sized organizations and their stakeholders which is why it is suggested future studies revolve around large organizations exclusively to investigate whether large organizations make the same effort of engaging in co-creation of brand meaning with stakeholders, whether any differences exist in the way small to medium-sized organizations engage in co-creational processes compared to large organizations, and whether this affect the outcomes of co-creation of brand meaning in terms of legitimacy. Furthermore, it may also be interesting to explore the value of co-creation within organizations in the business-to-business industry as there is a possibility the results would turn out to be different from the value business-to-consumer organizations may gain.

Furthermore, throughout the analysis of this study several themes arose that can be addresses as foundations for future studies. For example, it was found organizations gain value from co-creation of brand meaning in the form of reaching organizational goals. Therefore, this study prepare the ground for future research when it comes to exploring the motive behind co-creation from an organizational perspective.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Questions

Section 1: The use of co-creation

Which social media platforms do you use for your company, and what stakeholder groups are you hoping to reach?

1. What are the main goals for your corporation to use social media?
2. Please describe your typical interactions with stakeholders on social media.
3. Do you encourage stakeholders to actively communicate with you on social media?
 - a. In what ways?
 - b. To what benefit?
 - i. For the company?
 - ii. For the stakeholders?

Section 2: The value of co-creation

4. Is there a certain point in these interaction/s when value is realized?
5. What are the short-term or long-term outcomes of interacting with stakeholders using social media?
 - a. For the company?
 - b. For the stakeholders?
6. Based on online interactions with stakeholders, in what ways do you think your corporation takes stakeholders' expectations and opinions into consideration?

Section 3: Evaluation of co-creation

7. How do you evaluate or measure the success of your social media efforts?
 - a. Specifically, do you use feedback from stakeholders and incorporate it in your company?
 - i. How?
8. Are the valuable interactions measurable?
 - a. How?
 - b. How, if at all, are these valuable interactions reported?
9. Is it important for your company to evaluate interactions with stakeholders on social media?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. How do you evaluate it?
11. What other thoughts would you like to add?

APPENDIX B: UCF IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: Christina Maria Olsen

Date: January 02, 2018

Dear Researcher:

On 01/02/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination – Category 2 – Adult Participants
Project Title: Organizational Legitimacy As Co-Created Value
Investigator: Christina Maria Olsen
IRB Number: SBE-17-13652
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Jennifer Neal-Jimenez on 01/02/2018 04:41:09 PM EST

Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM



EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: Organizational Legitimacy as Co-Created Value

Principal Investigator: Christina Maria Olsen

Other Investigators: N/A

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Melissa Dodd

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

I appreciate that you take the time to talk with me today. My name is Christina Olsen, a graduate student at University of Central Florida. I expect the interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

I am doing a qualitative research project and the purpose is to understand when the online interaction with stakeholders becomes valuable for companies. Therefore, I will ask you questions about the interaction your company have with stakeholders on social media and other questions that are related to this topic throughout the interview. There are no right or wrong questions which means you are free to say whatever you have on your mind when asked a question. If there are any questions you do not feel comfortable with please feel free not to reply. On the other hand, if you feel you have more to add to a prior question we talked about but we have already moved on, please feel free to stop me at any time if you want to further elaborate.

All information will be managed confidentially. For this reason, no information will ever be connected to your name. I will be recording the interview to make sure I can recall what you say at any time. Okay?

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: If you have questions, concerns, or complaints you can contact Christina Maria Olsen Graduate Student, Mass Communication Program, Nicholson School of Communication at (407) 620-7076 or by email at cmo@knights.ucf.edu or Dr. Melissa Dodd, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Communication at (407) 823-4539 or by email at melissa.dodd@ucf.edu

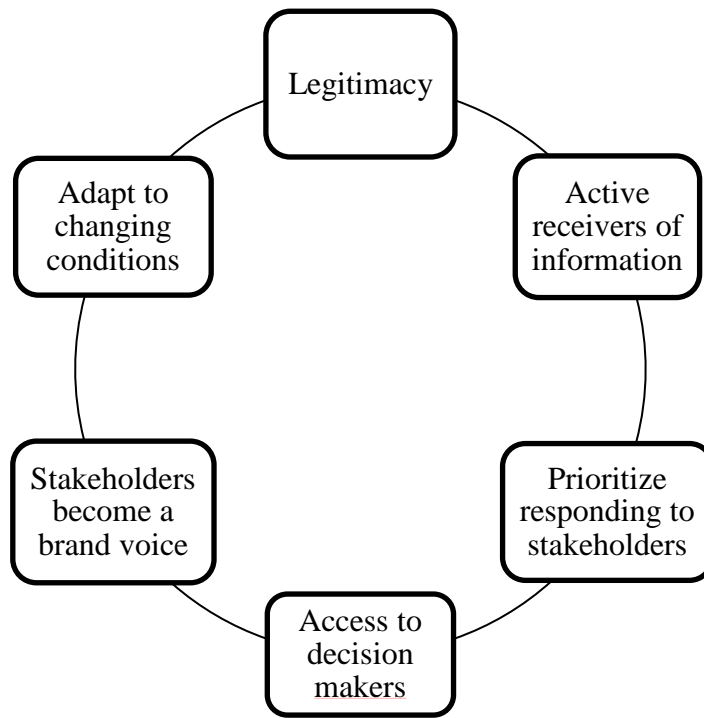
IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.

APPENDIX D: DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant Number	Participant Title	Type of Organization	Approx. No. of Employees	City
1	Marketing Director	Business organization	39	Colorado
2	Business owner and manager	Business organization	5	Orlando
3	Client Services Coordinator	Digital marketing agency	25	Orlando
4	Associate Director of Social Media	College	700	Orlando
5	Digital Communications Editor	Non-profit	7,500	Orlando
6	Digital Marketing Manager	Business organization	33	Orlando
7	Public Information Officer	Non-profit	100	Orlando
8	Marketing and Public Relations Manager	Non-profit	200	Orlando
9	Marketing Manager	Venue	9	Orlando
10	Marketing Manager	Resort	250-500	St. Pete Beach

11	Partner/Co-Founder	Web development agency	7	Orlando
12	Senior Account Executive	Marketing and PR agency	130	Orlando
13	Social Media Strategist	Advertising agency	45-50	Orlando

**APPENDIX E: BUILDING ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY AS A
CO-CREATED OUTCOME**



APPENDIX F: DEFENSE ANNOUNCEMENT

Announcing the Final Examination of Christina Maria Olsen for the degree of Master of Arts
in Communication

Date: April 4, 2018

Time: 11:00 a.m.

Room: NSC 228

Master title: Organizational Legitimacy as Co-Created Value

The purpose of this study is to explore how co-creational processes contribute to organizational legitimacy as a valuable outcome for organizations. 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with digital communication professionals from a variety of organizations in the United States to better understand the use of social media platforms and perceptions of value from engaging with stakeholders in co-creation. Results showed that organizations engage in co-creation of brand meaning via different methods such as referrals and feedback and that organizations reached different kinds of outcomes via these co-creational processes. These include being a resource for stakeholders, gaining brand advocates, reaching organizational goals, and being able to develop as an organization. In addition, results showed organizations that engage in co-creation of brand meaning put an effort in measuring these processes qualitatively to continuously improve as an organization. Based on these results it was possible to illuminate the relationship that exists between legitimacy and co-creation of brand meaning. Thus, it was discussed organizational legitimacy appears to be an outcome of co-created brand meaning in the form of moral legitimacy and actional legitimacy.

Outline of Studies:

Major: Master of Arts in Mass Communication

Educational Career:

B.A. University of Southern Denmark, 2015

Committee in Charge:

Dr. Melissa D. Dodd

Dr. Jennifer Sandoval

Dr. Timothy Sellnow

Approved for distribution by Dr. Melissa D. Dodd, Committee Chair, on March 23, 2018.

The public is welcome to attend.

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