

Toward an Employee Communication Mediation Model: Exploring the Effects of Social Media Engagement on Employee–Organization Relationships and Advocacy

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Grounded in the framework of the communication mediation model, this study examined the impacts of employees' organizational identification and social media engagement on their relationships with their organization and advocacy behavior through a national survey of employees working at large organizations in China. The current study found that employees' organizational identification significantly affects their social media engagement and perceived relationships with their organization. It also documented that social media engagement has a positive impact on favorable employee–organization relationships (EORs), which influence employee advocacy. Furthermore, social media engagement and EORs were identified as mediators to explain how the influence flows from organizational identification to EORs and that from social media engagement to advocacy. This study is a pioneering study to apply the communication mediation model to the public relations field and proposes the employee communication mediation model to enrich public relations theories. Its results have practical implications for Chinese organizations.

Keywords: social media engagement, employee–organization relationships, employee advocacy, organizational identification, COVID-19

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As the largest social media market in the world, China owns a dynamic and diverse social media landscape with such popular platforms as WeChat (900 million daily users) and Weibo (241 million daily users; Seema, 2021; Thomala, 2022). In particular, Chinese employees have increasingly used social media in the workplace. According to Penguin Intelligence's (2017) report, over 80% of WeChat users adopt it for work-related purposes (e.g., transmitting documents, video conferencing, and business transactions). Ninety percent of Chinese employees used WeChat for workplace communication (Deyan, 2022). As China is witnessing the prevalence of social media usage among employees, it would be valuable to examine how Chinese employees use social media to engage with their organizations and explore its antecedents and outcomes.

Social media engagement has emerged as an important research focus in the public relations field. Social media are defined as "Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 49). Following Ewing, Men, and O'Neil (2019), this study focuses on both general (e.g., WeChat and Weibo) and internal (e.g., DingTalk) social media platforms, the latter of which are operated by organizations and are accessible only to their employees (Buettner, 2015). Social media have been used as a communication platform for engagement with organizations (e.g., Wang & Yang, 2020). Scholars have identified positive outcomes of online engagement, such as positive electronic word-of-mouth communication and social capital (e.g., Guo & Chen, 2022; Wang, Ki, & Kim, 2017). However, limited attention has been paid to employees' social media engagement and its outcomes, such as employee-organization relationships (EORs).

Many organizations face the challenge of their employees' dissatisfaction with their relationships with the organization during crises. Especially during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, both organizations and their employees have been experiencing tremendous uncertainty and anxiety, and trust in leadership would play a critical role in influencing the workforce effectiveness. Some organizational measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as working from home and self-quarantine, have influenced the relationships between employees and their organization (Chen & Sriphon, 2021). However, most EOR studies have focused on the Western context (e.g., Walden, Jung, & Westerman, 2017; Wang, 2022), whose findings may be inapplicable to the Chinese context considering its unique organizational cultures (e.g., people focus and relationship establishment; Pun, Chin, & Lau, 2000). Moreover, the status of the relationships between Chinese employees and their organization during a global crisis (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic) has remained unknown. The present study can fill those research gaps by contextualizing itself in China in the larger context of EORs and exploring their mediating mechanism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study aims to address an important research question: whether and how employees' media use mediates the relationship between their perceptions and behaviors during a crisis. Grounded in the framework of the communication mediation model, the current study examines the effects of employees' organizational identification and social media engagement on EOR quality and the subsequent advocacy. It conducted a national survey of 466 Chinese employees working at large organizations in 2020. It advances the literature on social media engagement and relationship management by providing empirical evidence of the impacts of employees' organizational identification and social media engagement on EORs and advocacy

in China. It serves as a pioneering study to apply the communication mediation model to the public relations field and proposes the employee communication mediation model to enrich public relations theories. Furthermore, we purposely situate this study in an organizational crisis context triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, aiming to enrich crisis communication literature. As scholars have suggested, employees as important internal stakeholders and their social media engagement could play a significant role in helping organizations to repair negative images and engaging in positive crisis communication (Kim, 2020). More attention should be paid toward the internal communication for an engaged workforce despite chaos created by a crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2011; Kim, 2020). Particularly, when employees were impacted by a rare, highly uncertain, and severe global health crisis, their work environment became fragile, and it was difficult to predict and manage employees' social media engagement as well (Tao, Lee, Sun, Li, & He, 2022). However, EORs and the effectiveness of social media communication within a pandemic context received limited discussion. This study thus fills the gap by examining the effect of social media engagement on EORs in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results have some practical implications for Chinese organizations to enhance their employees' organizational identification, engage employees on social media, and establish a positive relationship with employees during crises.

Literature Review

Communication Mediation Model

The communication mediation model indicates the O-S-O-R model (Markus & Zajonc, 1985). The first O (preorientations) refers to cognitive and motivational characteristics and personal attributes; the S (stimulus) focuses on communications (e.g., media use and interpersonal communication); the second O (postorientations) refers to subsequent orientations (e.g., political efficacy and knowledge) that mediate the relationship between communication and behaviors; and the R (response) indicates the subsequent behavioral response (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). This model proposes that communication behaviors (e.g., media use) mediate the relationship between structural-objective factors and cognition and behaviors (Rojas, Pérez, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010).

The communication mediation model has evolved since the 1980s. In the original and subsequent conceptualizations of this model, mediated content was identified as an antecedent of interpersonal communication, resulting in engagement (Cho et al., 2009). Researchers have advanced this model by proposing a citizen communication mediation model (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005) and a campaign communication mediation model (Shah et al., 2007). According to Shah and colleagues (2017), the development of social media has called for a revision of the communication mediation model. The relationships in the revised model should be "reciprocal and interdependent, with social media dynamics shaping news content and interpretation, just as news shapes social media reactions and discussion" (Shah et al., 2017, p. 496).

The communication mediation model has been applied in the fields of political communication (Park & Kaye, 2019), media effects (McGregor & Mourão, 2017), health communication (Holbert, 2005), advertising (Shah et al., 2007), and social media (Chan, Chen, & Lee, 2017; Su, Lee, & Borah, 2021). For example, Su and colleagues (2021) applied this model to the social media context and found that the public's

internal political efficacy mediates the relationship between information seeking on political social media and government evaluation. However, it appears that there is no prior public relations scholarship examining the communication mediation model. The model has the potential to explain and predict the mediating role of media use on the relationship between cognitive characteristics and public relations outcomes (e.g., supportive behavioral intentions and advocacy). Furthermore, most studies tested this model in the U.S. context (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, Huber, & Liu, 2019), and Lee (2017) called for tests of its effectiveness at the international level. Thus, this study applies the O-S-O-R model to the public relations field by proposing an employee communication mediation model to examine the relationship between organizational identification (orientation), social media engagement (stimulus), EOR quality (orientation), and advocacy (response), and testing it in the Chinese context.

Organizational Identification

Organizational identification is conceptualized as “a psychological linkage between the individual and the organization whereby the individual feels a deep, self-defining affective and cognitive bond with the organization as a social entity” (Edwards & Peccei, 2007, p. 30). Organizational identification can determine employee perceptions and behaviors, such as job satisfaction, work behavior, extra-role behavior, and word-of-mouth communication, (e.g., Blader, Patil, & Packer, 2017; Fasih, Jalees, & Khan, 2019; Wang et al., 2017). According to Abbasi, Shabbir, Abbas, and Tahir (2021), individuals who perceive strong identification with an organization are more likely to engage in the organization’s activities. Although scholars have examined the effects of organizational identification (e.g., Abbasi et al., 2021), they have seldom explored whether and how it can be connected to social media engagement.

Social Media Engagement

Engagement has been considered as a new paradigm in public relations (Stoker & Tusinski, 2006). Public relations studies have examined various engagement contexts (Devin & Lane, 2014), including social media engagement (Guidry, Jin, Orr, Messner, & Meganck, 2017), mobile phone engagement (Wang et al., 2017), public engagement (Bruce & Shelley, 2010), and employee engagement (Welch, 2011). In particular, employees’ social media engagement has drawn increasing attention. It is defined as employees’ “behavioral involvement in organization-related activities on social media” (Wang et al., 2017, p. 134). Social media engagement has three elements: (1) online and offline interaction with an organization; (2) employees’ sharing of experiences, expectations, and suggestions with the organization; and (3) employees’ roles in community building (Jiang, Luo, & Kulemeka, 2016). Engagement on social media is symbolically manifested by behaviors including posting, commenting, liking, and sharing (Khan, 2017). Employees can engage with an organization by participating in the dialogue on social media (e.g., interacting with other stakeholders and sharing the organization’s posts with their own friends; Men & Tsai, 2013). Researchers have indicated that social media engagement can help to establish and maintain relationships (Sashi, 2012) and build positive megaphoning (Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim, 2020). Men and Hung-Baesecke (2015) examined the effects of corporate communication channels on Chinese employees’ perceptions and documented that social media engagement influences their perceived authenticity and transparency of their corporations. The present study adopts Wang and colleagues’ (2017) conceptualization of social media engagement and focuses on employee social media engagement in the crisis context (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic).

Scholars have studied employee social media engagement and crisis communication from theoretical and empirical perspectives. For example, Jiang and colleagues (2016) proposed a model of social media engagement in crisis communication that includes crisis involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence. Dhanesh and Picherit-Duthler (2021) studied employees' engagement when they worked remotely during the COVID-19 crisis and found that an organization's internal crisis communication influences its employees' engagement. According to Triantafillidou and Yannas (2020), an organization's use of distinctive social media channels and crisis response strategies lead to different levels of positive social media engagement.

This study examines the antecedent of employee social media engagement during a crisis (i.e., organizational identification). Public relations researchers have considered engagement to be a process through which organizations can involve stakeholders (e.g., employees and consumers) in their activities by using social media tools (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). Harwood (1999) examined the impact of social identity on the motivations of television viewing and found that individuals selectively consume media that "strengthen their identification with a particular social group and/or make that identification more positive" (p. 123). Hong and Yang (2011) documented that customers' organizational identification can facilitate their use of organizational media. Similarly, employees who identify with their organization tend to use social media to engage with the organization, such as sharing and reading the organization's messages on social media. Therefore, this study posed the following hypothesis.

H1: Employees' organizational identification is positively related to their social media engagement during crises.

Employee–Organizational Relationships

For the past two decades, public relations research has taken organization–public relationships (OPRs) as its key focus. OPRs are conceptualized as "the degree that the organization and its publics trust one another, agree on [who] has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another" (Huang, 1998, p. 12). In particular, EORs are considered to be a special type of OPRs and a conceptual extension of OPRs to the internal communication context (Kang & Sung, 2017; Men, 2014). EORs are conceptualized as "the degree to which an organization and its employees trust one another, agree on who has the rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to the other" (Men & Stacks, 2014, p. 307). EORs have four dimensions: trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment, which have been widely studied in relationship management scholarship (Men & Stacks, 2014).

EORs have drawn increasing attention from public relations researchers for more than one decade (Wang, 2022). They have examined the antecedents and outcomes of EORs. For instance, Wang (2022) examined the impact of EORs on employees' situational perceptions and found that employees' perceived good relationships with their organizations strengthen their level of involvement and problem recognition as well as weaken their constraint recognition. Men (2021) studied the effect of Chinese startup CEOs' communication on employee perceptual and behavioral outcomes and found that their communication responsiveness and authenticity facilitate favorable EORs.

Scholars have explored the relationship between engagement and EORs (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017). According to Bruce and Shelley (2010), public engagement led to mutually beneficial relationships. Public relations researchers also argued that social media engagement is associated with positive OPRs (Smith & Gallicano, 2015). Chen, Ji, and Men (2017) conducted an interview with entrepreneurs and employees working in Chinese startup corporations and found that their social media engagement aims to establish relationships with the public. Men and Tsai (2014) examined the effects of publics' social media engagement with organizations on perceived organizational transparency, OPRs, and public advocacy, and found that social media engagement positively influenced the OPR quality. Given that EORs are a special type of OPRs, we assumed that employees' engagement with their organization on social media, which is two-way communication in nature (Ewing et al., 2019), also enhances their perceived positive relationship with the organization. The following hypothesis was therefore posited.

H2: Employees' social media engagement is positively related to EOR quality during crises.

In addition to social media engagement, organizational identification has also been linked to relationship outcomes. For instance, Mael and Ashforth (1992) conducted a survey of 297 alumni to test a model of organizational identification and found that alumni's identification with their institution was positively related to their satisfaction with the institution, which is an EOR dimension. Organizational identification was also considered to be a predictor of commitment (Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004), which is another EOR dimension. According to Bagozzi (2003), employees' identification with their organization results in their positive feelings toward the organization, such as trust in the organization (an EOR dimension). This study extends this literature by hypothesizing that employees' identification with their organization influences their perceived relationships with the organization, especially during crises. Thus, the following hypothesis was posited.

H3: Employees' organizational identification is positively associated with EOR quality during crises.

Employee Advocacy Behavior

Advocacy refers to supporting or recommending a specific issue or individual and arguing for it. Employee advocacy is conceptualized as employees' voluntarily sharing positive information about their organization or defending the organization to the public (Men, 2014). Employee advocacy is different from positive word-of-mouth in that advocacy includes defending an organization from critics (Men, 2014; Walden & Westerman, 2018). In addition, positive megaphoning focuses on sharing an organization's achievements with and refuting prejudiced comments about it to external audiences, which is considered to be part of employee advocacy, whereas advocacy does not target external audiences only (Thelen, 2020). Most scholars consider employee advocacy to target external publics only (e.g., Men, 2014; Walden & Westerman, 2018), while a few researchers consider it to involve both external and internal stakeholders (e.g., Thelen, 2020). We support the latter argument that employee advocacy targets both types of stakeholders based on its definition (Men, 2014). Employees can serve as organizational advocates by sharing positive information about organizational issues, which is considered a key factor of organizational effectiveness (Kim & Rhee, 2011).

Researchers have identified several predictors of advocacy behavior, such as positive EORs, symmetrical communication, and employee altruism and self-enhancement motive (e.g., Kim & Rhee, 2011; Lee & Kim, 2020; Walden & Westerman, 2018). Employee advocacy behavior can offer not only opportunities for organizations to maximize their strategic opportunities but also opportunities to minimize their threats during crises (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Kang and Sung (2017) examined the effect of symmetrical internal communication on employees' relationship perceptions and communication behaviors and found that quality EORs enhance employees' intentions of positive megaphoning, which is conceptually similar to advocacy. Lee and Kim (2020) documented that favorable EORs lead to employee advocacy intention on social media. If employees experience favorable relationships with their organizations, they tend to share useful information for their organizations during crises and forward positive information related to the organizations in their routine communication with other stakeholders (Kim & Rhee, 2011). Therefore, we assumed that employees who perceive better relationships with their organizations would be more likely to engage in advocacy behavior, especially during crises. Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed.

H4: EOR quality is positively related to employee advocacy during crises.

Researchers have explored the relationship between engagement and communication behaviors. According to Kang and Sung (2017), engaged employees tend to have more/stronger positive communication behaviors than their counterparts. According to MacLeod and Clarke (2011), Gallup reported that 78% of engaged employees can recommend their corporation's products or service, which is part of advocacy. Lee, Cho, Sun, and Li (2020) examined the impacts of employees' social media messages on publics' engagement and word-of-mouth communication and found that the publics' engagement on social media positively influenced their word-of-mouth intentions about the corporation. Publics' social media engagement has been found to be positively associated with public advocacy, which refers to the voluntary promotion or defense of an organization (Men & Tsai, 2014). Kang and Sung (2017) also documented that employees' engagement positively influenced their positive megaphoning behavior during crises, which is conceptually similar to advocacy. Therefore, we assumed that employees who frequently use social media to engage with their organizations would be more likely to promote it and share positive information about it during crises. Thus, the following hypothesis was posited.

H5: Employees' social media engagement is positively related to their advocacy during crises.

The Mediating Role of Social Media Engagement and EORs

In addition to examining the direct relationship between organizational identification and EORs and that between social media engagement and advocacy, this study went a step further to explore the mediating mechanism of social media engagement and EORs in these relationships. The communication mediation model suggests that media use can mediate the relationship between structural-objective factors and perceptual and behavioral consequences (Rojas et al., 2010). Employee engagement was identified as a mediator between its conditions and positive employee consequences (e.g., organizational commitment and loyalty; Kang, 2014; Saks, 2006). Thus, this study proposed that employees' social media engagement may positively mediate the effect of organizational identification on good EORs. Employees with a strong identification with their organization are more likely to engage with the organization on social media, which

can furthermore lead them to perceive favorable relationships with the organization. The communication mediation model also indicates that subsequent orientations mediate the effect of communication on behavior (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). Therefore, we argued that EORs (subsequent orientation) may mediate the effect of social media engagement (communication) on advocacy (behavior). Employees who engage with their organizations on social media may tend to perceive good relationships with the organization, which may motivate them to share positive information on it. Thus, the following mediating relationships were proposed.

H6: Social media engagement mediates the relationship between organizational identification and EOR quality.

H7: EOR quality mediates the relationship between social media engagement and advocacy.

Based on the literature, this study proposed the employee communication mediation model (see Figure 1).

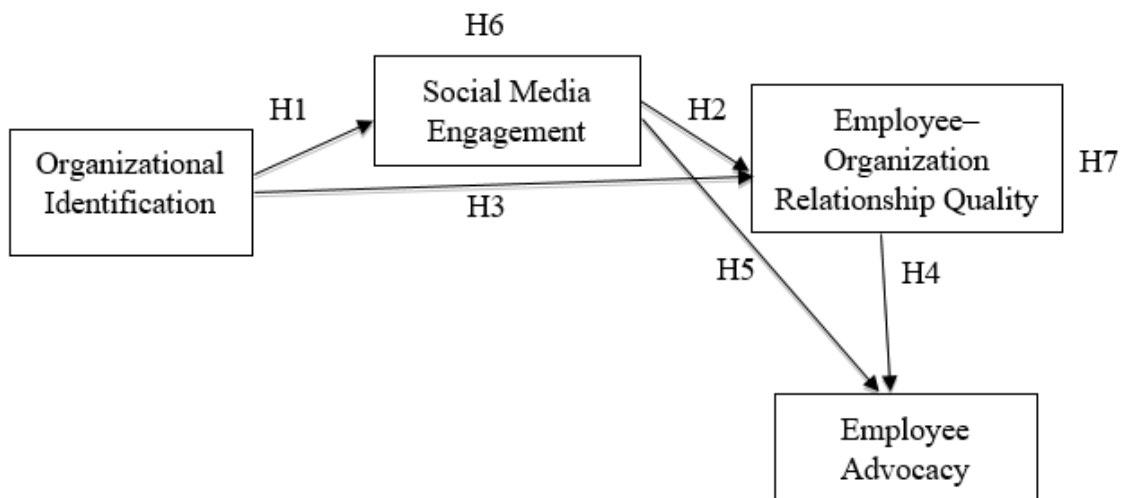


Figure 1. Proposed model.

Method

Participants

This study examined the impacts of employees' organizational identification and social media engagement on EOR quality and advocacy. The population of this study was Chinese employees who were working at large organizations in China and were social media users. Large organizations refer to those with more than 250 employees (Carim & Warwick, 2013). The researchers invited a top research firm, Sojump, to collect data in China, because it possesses a national panel containing more than 2.6 million members in China (Wu & Cui, 2019). Many researchers have also used this data-collection method in survey research on EORs and social media (e.g., Kim & Rhee, 2011; Lu, Ray, Ha, & Chen, 2020; Wang, 2022). The research

firm randomly selected eligible participants from its panel and asked them to participate in the online survey via the link to the online questionnaire. A total of 466 qualified Chinese employees were recruited to complete the questionnaire.

A Web-based survey was conducted from February to March 2020 after receiving institutional review board approval. We designed the survey questionnaire in English first and then translated it to Chinese by using Brislin's (1970) back-translation procedure. The questionnaire was posted on Sojump, an online survey platform widely used in China. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the researchers informed the respondents of the voluntary nature of their participation and assured them that their responses would be kept confidential. Their responses were recorded via Sojump and were stored on a safe server. Monetary incentives were offered for completion of the survey.

Measures

As shown in Table A1, the measurement items of all the key variables were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measures of *organizational identification* were adopted from Mael and Ashforth's (1992) scale. The level of reliability was .79. To measure *social media engagement*, respondents were asked how they reacted on social media (e.g., Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin) when their organization encountered the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media engagement was measured using five items related to organizational purposes that were adapted from Men and Tsai's (2013) scale. The Cronbach's alpha was .75. The *EOR quality* was measured was adopted from Men and Stacks's (2014) EOR scale. This measure captured four dimensions of EORs: trust ($\alpha = .70$), control mutuality ($\alpha = .79$), commitment ($\alpha = .79$), and satisfaction ($\alpha = .80$; Men & Stacks, 2014). The measures of employee advocacy were adapted from previous scales (Kang & Sung, 2017; Lee & Kim, 2020). The level of reliability was .78. In addition, the respondents' age, prior satisfaction with the organization, working experience, and intensity of social media use were treated as control variables.

Statistical Procedures for Data Analysis

This study used the expectation-maximization method to handle missing data. To test the seven proposed hypotheses, the researchers conducted a correlation analysis, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and structural equation modeling (SEM).

Results

Among the employee respondents to this survey, 51.5% were female ($n = 240$) and 48.5% were male ($n = 226$). Seventy percent of the participants ($n = 329$) were aged between 25 and 34. They spent an average of 4.34 years ($SD = 3.51$) in their current organizations. The respondents worked in management and nonmanagement roles: 3% were top-level managers ($n = 14$), 29.6% were middle-level managers ($n = 138$), 40.8% were lower-level managers ($n = 190$), and 29.6% were not in management positions ($n = 124$). The respondents' organizations covered 29 industries, including manufacturing (20.4%, $n = 95$), information technology (19.7%, $n = 92$), education (7.5%, $n = 35$), and finance (5.2%, $n = 24$).

In a typical week, the participants used WeChat (99.6%, $n = 464$) most frequently, followed by QQ (78.3%, $n = 365$) and Weibo (73.2%, $n = 341$).

Correlation Analysis

A total of 466 responses were used for the correlation analysis. All the suggested independent variables were significantly related to the dependent variables. The correlations between organizational identification, social media engagement, EOR quality, and advocacy ranged from .27 to .73.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The researchers conducted a CFA to assess the construct validity of the measurement model. In the CFA model, EOR quality was regarded as a latent variable with four indicators: trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. The results of the CFA indicated that the measurement model fitted well with the data, $\chi^2(466) = 242.733$, $p < .001$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .96, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = .95, SRMR = .04, and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .056. All the factor loadings of the latent variables were larger than .65 at the $p < .001$ level.

Structural Equation Modeling

To test our hypotheses, a structural equation model was further estimated using the data set. This model demonstrated a good data–model fit, $\chi^2(147) = 294.721$, $p < .001$, CFI = .96, TLI = .95, SRMR = .04, and RMSEA = .046. The path coefficients for the models were illustrated in Figure 2.

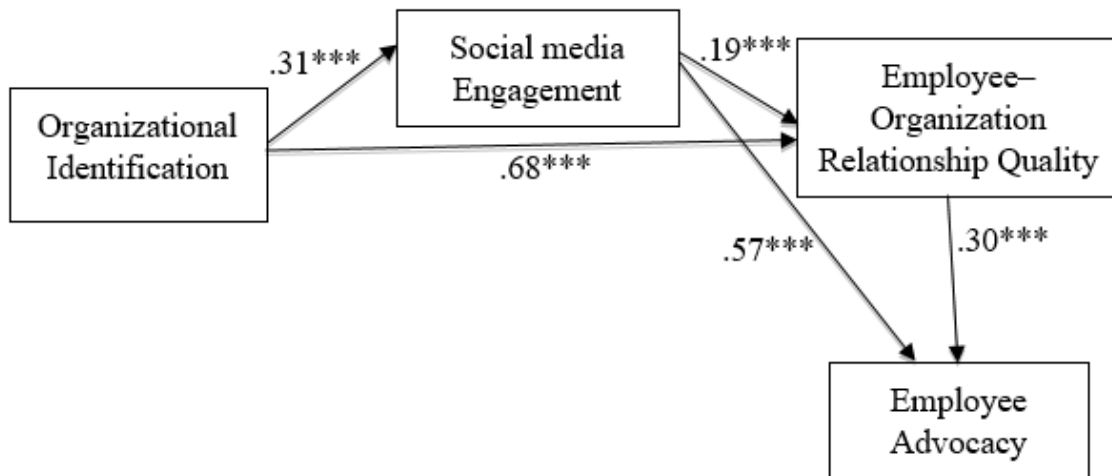


Figure 2. Results of the SEM analysis.

Hypothesis Testing

H1 posited that organizational identification positively influences social media engagement. The results of the SEM analysis suggest that organizational identification was a significant positive predictor of social media engagement ($\beta = .31, p < .001$). Thus, H1 was supported. H2 predicted a positive relationship between social media engagement and EOR quality. Our results also showed support for H2 ($\beta = .19, p < .001$). H3 posited that organizational identification has a positive impact on EOR quality. The results showed that organizational identification significantly positively affects EOR quality ($\beta = .68, p < .001$). Therefore, H3 was supported. H4 posited that EOR quality is a positive predictor of advocacy. EOR quality was found to significantly influence employee advocacy ($\beta = .30, p < .001$), thus supporting H4. H5 predicted a positive relationship between social media engagement and employee advocacy. Social media engagement showed a significant effect on advocacy ($\beta = .57, p < .001$). Thus, H5 was supported.

To test the indirect effects, we conducted mediation tests with a bias-corrected bootstrapping procedure (with 5,000 samples). The results indicated that the social media engagement was a significant mediator in the relationship between organizational identity and EOR quality ($\beta = .06, p < .001$, BC 95% CI: [.03 to .10]). Thus, H6 was supported. The results also suggested that EORs significantly mediate the association between social media engagement and advocacy ($\beta = .06, p < .001$, BC 95% CI: [.02 to .11]), thus supporting H7.

Discussion

The advent of new communication technologies has offered great opportunities for organizations to engage their employees. This study examined the effects of employees' organizational identification and social media engagement on positive EORs and advocacy. Specifically, we argued that employees' engagement with their organization on social media can play a critical role in fostering their favorable relationships with the organization, which, in turn, would inspire their advocacy. This study advances the literature on social media engagement and relationship management.

One major finding of this study is that employees' organizational identification significantly affected their social media engagement in crises. Social media provide employees with an accessible platform to obtain updated information from their organization, share it with others, and interact with their colleagues. This finding is consistent with previous studies documenting that customers' organizational identification predicted their use of organizational media (Hong & Yang, 2011). One possible explanation for this result is that employees who feel a better sense of belonging and attachment to their organization use both general and internal social media platforms more frequently to engage with their organization in crises. Chinese employees with collectivistic values are more likely to read and share their organization's posts about a crisis on social media if they have an emotional identification with that organization. Moreover, such employees are more likely to consider themselves as part of the organization and thus to care about the comments of external publics of the organization (Wang et al., 2017).

This study extends previous studies on EORs (e.g., Kang & Sung, 2017; Kim, 2007; Wang, 2022) by identifying employees' social media engagement as a new predictor of EOR quality. It implies that

employees who are deeply engaged with their organizations on social media tend to perceive positive relationships with the organization. Social media allow employees to stay connected with their organizations. By engaging with their organizations on social media (e.g., participating in conversations by commenting on the organization's social media page and sharing organizational messages with others), employees became an integral part of their organization's online community (Men & Tsai, 2014), which therefore contributes to the formation of a favorable relationship with the organization (Pronschinske, Groza, & Walker, 2012). Organizations can use both general and internal social media platforms to release accessible, substantial, and timely information (Rawlins, 2009) to employees and actively interact with them, which might foster better-quality relationships with employees.

Organizational identification was also documented to be a predictor of EOR quality. This finding supports previous research demonstrating the association between consumers' relational satisfaction and their organizational identification (Men & Tsai, 2014). Our finding extends this to employees, implying that employees who perceive a high level of identification with their organizations tend to perceive a better quality of relationship with the organization. To enhance employees' favorable relationships with their organizations, our study emphasized the paramount importance of enhancing a personal sense of oneness with the organizational values and norms, which helped to facilitate and maintain the positive relationships in the long run (e.g., Hong & Yang, 2011). To strengthen their employees' identification and sense of belonging for better relationships, managerial implications included building a diverse and inclusive culture for people with different backgrounds and colors, encouraging employees' participation on organizational citizenship activities (e.g., team-building contests, corporate crisis management training, and corporate picnics), and helping employees to reach work-life balance (Rose, 2022).

The current study also adds to the growing body of literature on relationship management and social media by documenting that EOR quality and employees' social media engagement positively influenced their advocacy in a global crisis. Previous research also documented that consumers' identification and relational satisfaction with a company strengthened their word-of-mouth communication (Hong & Yang, 2011). Ours is among the first studies to demonstrate that Chinese employees who perceive good relationships with their organizations and engage with their organizations on social media (e.g., reading and sharing its posts about a crisis) during the crisis are more likely to advocate for the organization. One possible explanation is that Chinese employees normally hold collectivistic values (Song, Liu, Gu, & He, 2018) and therefore tend to support their organizations and defend it to other stakeholders, especially during crises, compared with Western employees. Thus, it is critical for Chinese organizations to build favorable relationships with their employees to facilitate their advocacy behavior.

Furthermore, results demonstrated that the direct impact of employee social media engagement on employee advocacy appeared to be much stronger than that of EOR perceptions. A possible explanation is that employee advocacy in recent years can be easily expressed on both general and internal social media platforms with their increasing popularity. According to Kim and Rhee (2011), employee advocacy on social media highly depends on participants' voluntarily sharing information within their circle of networking. Consequently, findings of this study supported previous literature (e.g., Lee et al., 2020) and highlighted the substantive role that social media have played in influencing employees' advocacy behaviors online. This new level of influence could be clearly evidenced in the Chinese social media context. Given the fact that

many Chinese employees use social media (e.g., WeChat) frequently in the workplace (Penguin Intelligence, 2017), they may tend to engage with their organizations on social media by browsing and reading the organization's social media messages during a crisis (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic), which facilitates their sharing of relevant information about the crisis. Thus, Chinese employees' social media engagement with their organization may play a more important role in facilitating their advocacy behavior.

This study enriches crisis communication literature (e.g., Cheng & Fisk, 2021; Cheng, Wang, & Kong, 2022; Jiang et al., 2016; Triantafyllidou & Yannas, 2020) by demonstrating the social media impact on EORs in crises. Previous public relations research mainly focused on the positive relationships between organizations and their publics, while limited discussions addressed the challenging relationships in crises (Cheng & Fisk, 2021). This study fills the gap by supporting a mediating mechanism in which organizational identification indirectly influences favorable EORs through social media engagement in crises. Results indicate that employees who have a strong identification with their organizations tend to engage with them on social media, which consequently influences their perceived relationships with the organization. This finding implies that employees' organizational identification plays a critical role in facilitating their relationships with their organizations by increasing their social media engagement. Thus, Chinese large organizations should pay more attention to enhancing their employees' identification with them (e.g., by facilitating a sense of belonging among employees and offering a favorable basis for employees' social identity; van Dick, Ullrich, & Tissington, 2006) to increase employee engagement on both general and internal social media platforms, which can lead to favorable EORs. In addition, this study finds that employee engagement has a positive indirect impact on advocacy through good EORs. One possible explanation is that Chinese employees with collectivistic values tend to help their organizations spread positive information about it on social media if they frequently engage with the organization on social media and therefore perceive good relationships with it during crises.

This study has critical theoretical implications. It adds to the growing body of literature on social media engagement and EORs by offering empirical evidence of the effects of employees' social media engagement on positive EORs and advocacy. It is one of the first studies to apply the communication mediation model to the public relations field and to test it in the Chinese context. It also proposes the employee communication mediation model that bridges organizational identification, social media engagement, EORs, and advocacy, which enriches public relations theories. In addition, this study examines the relationships in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which provides insight into employee communication during crises.

The findings of this study give rise to some practical suggestions for Chinese organizations on how to enhance their employees' identification with them, facilitate employee social media engagement, and establish relationships with employees. Chinese organizations are suggested to arouse their employees' identification with them by building organizational cultures and enhancing employee sense of belonging to facilitate positive social media engagement. As social media are fundamental communication tools used by modern employees, communication professionals can develop internal social media applications with various functions related to the organization. For example, such applications could include organizational news, events, social networking, and announcements. Additionally, communication professionals ought to operate their official social networking sites in general (e.g., on Weibo and WeChat) effectively and encourage

employees to use social media to obtain useful organizational information and interact with their colleagues and managers (Wang et al., 2017). During the pandemic period, providing consistent, timely, and accurate information on social media can help generate a positive relationship between organizations and their employees as well (Wang, Hao, & Platt, 2021). In addition, human resources departments can conduct regular employee surveys to clarify employee needs and concerns about their organizations, report the results to management, and make suggestions.

Limitations

It is critical to note two limitations of this study. First, the findings of this study were generated from a sample from large organizations in China. Thus, they cannot be generalized to small- and medium-sized organizations and other countries. Second, the current study used cross-sectional data, which can hardly support the causal relationships. Therefore, its findings should be interpreted with caution.

Future Research

Future researchers can examine social media engagement in various populations (e.g., the general public and consumers) in different countries (e.g., United States) and further compare the engagement patterns of different groups by adopting the uses and gratifications approach (Wang et al., 2017). They can also empirically test the proposed employee communication mediation model in other contexts (e.g., another type of crisis such as organizational misdeed or a noncrisis context). Scholars can use a dyadic approach to examine social media engagement of both employees and their organization to test the two-way communication. In addition, future studies would benefit from exploring other potential antecedents and outcomes of EOR quality, such as other new communication technology (e.g., mobile phone) and public relations practices. They can also examine the potential effects of negative social media engagement on EORs and employee advocacy, especially during crises.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Measurement Items of the Key Variables.

Construct	Dimension/Item	Mean	SD
Organizational Identification		3.78	0.72
	When people criticize my organization, it feels like a personal insult.	3.59	0.98
	When I talk about my organization, I usually say "we" rather than "they."	4.15	0.95
	This organization's successes are my successes.	3.69	1.05
	When someone praises my organization, it feels like a personal compliment.	3.82	0.91
	If a media story criticizes my organization, I would feel embarrassed.	3.64	1.04
Social Media Engagement		3.14	0.88
	I shared my organization's social media posts about the issue with other friends/families.	2.90	1.26
	I posted stories, comments, pictures, or videos about the issue on social media.	2.64	1.31
	I read my organization's posts and relevant comments about the issue on social media.	3.85	1.07
	I sent private messages to the operator of my organization's social media page about the issue.	2.82	1.31
	I talked with my colleagues about the issue on my organization's internal instant messaging (e.g., Messenger).	3.50	1.23
EORs	Trust	3.72	0.73
	Whenever my organization makes an important decision, I know it will be concerned about me.	3.31	0.94
	My organization is reliable in keeping its promises.	4.05	0.85
	I believe that my organization takes my opinions into account when making decisions.	3.50	1.04
	I feel confident about my organization's ability.	4.00	0.87

Control Mutuality	3.52	0.80
My organization and I are attentive to what the other says.	3.66	0.98
My organization believes my opinions are legitimate.	3.44	0.97
My organization really listens to what I have to say.	3.56	1.00
The management of my organization gives me sufficient voice in the decision-making process.	3.42	1.10
Commitment	3.95	0.65
I feel that my organization is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me.	3.74	0.92
I can see that my organization wants to maintain a relationship with me.	3.94	0.89
I value my relationship with my organization more than with other organizations.	4.08	0.86
I would rather work together with my organization than not.	4.03	0.93
Satisfaction	3.90	0.73
I am happy with my organization.	3.88	0.92
Both the organization and I benefit from the relationship between us.	3.97	0.93
Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship that my organization has developed with me.	4.02	0.90
I enjoy dealing with my organization.	3.74	0.97
Employee Advocacy	4.04	0.68
I will speak favorably about my organization in public.	4.06	0.85
I will recommend my organization's mission and services to others.	3.94	0.94
I will say positive things about my organization to other people.	4.10	0.86
I will recommend my organization to someone who seeks my advice.	4.07	0.89