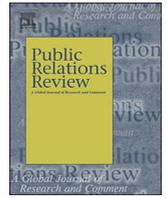


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Transparency tested: The influence of message features on public perceptions of organizational transparency

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ABSTRACT

The concept of transparency has been promoted within the public relations and business literature as both ethical and advantageous; however, the effectiveness of transparency is seldom empirically put to the test. In particular, the use of clarity, disclosure, and accuracy in organizational messages needs to be empirically examined. To this end, we conducted an online experiment using a 2 (high vs. low message transparency) x 2 (news story placed before or after an organizational statement) between-subjects design. Participants ($n = 357$) perceived organizations as more transparent and credible when exposed to messages exhibiting greater levels of clarity, disclosure, and accuracy as opposed to messages that did not. Placement of an information anchor in the form of an objective news story before the organizational message increased the perceived organizational transparency when messages employed transparent design features and decreased the perceived organizational transparency when messages did not use these features. These results provide significant implications for practitioners attempting to convey organizational transparency at the tactical level through message features.

1. Introduction

For decades, scholars and practitioners in the fields of public relations, journalism, economics, finance, politics, corporate governance, and accounting have espoused the benefits of transparency as normative organizational behavior (Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Craft & Heim, 2008). Perceptions of organizational transparency have routinely been associated with positive outcomes such as trust, progress, credibility, and accountability (Craft & Heim, 2008; Craig, Ngondo, & Flynn, 2016; Lee & Joseph, 2013; Rawlins, 2009; Sisson, 2017; Tsetsura & Aziz, 2017). While several scholars have developed theoretical models regarding the way organizational transparency might affect receiver attitudes (Laud & Schepers, 2009; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016; Taiminen et al., 2015), few scholars have operationalized and tested how organizational transparency is actually communicated via message design features. Even fewer scholars have quantitatively measured how organizational behaviors and messages designed to communicate transparency's impact on publics' attitudes or behaviors. Additionally, the way publics translate perceived message transparency into perceived organizational transparency has not been sufficiently investigated.

As such, this paper tests the use of message design features related to the underlying constructs of transparency to understand the effects of organizational messages on the perceived transparency of those messages as well as subsequent perceptions of organizational transparency and credibility. The study addresses two gaps within the extant literature regarding transparency. First, the conceptual and operational definition of transparency across various disciplines varies and has rarely been investigated empirically (Craft & Heim, 2008). To that end, we utilized Schnackenberg and Tomlinson's (2016) conceptual definition of transparency to

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identify message features that could be used to communicate transparency to demonstrate an organization's strategic orientation toward transparency. Secondly, the experimental design offers empirical evidence of the potential impact of transparency on public perceptions (Craft & Heim, 2008). Specifically, this study tests the proposed association between transparency and organizational credibility and attitude toward the organization.

To this end, we conducted an online experiment to test the influence of level of message transparency based on the inclusion or exclusion of the message design features of clarity, accuracy, and disclosure. We also examined the effect of a news story that provided anchoring, comparative information and that was placed before or after the organizational message. Findings suggest that organizational messages designed to be more transparent by incorporating message features such as clarity, accuracy, and disclosure not only led to greater perceived organizational transparency, but also produced stronger perceptions of organizational credibility and more positive attitudes toward the organization.

2. Literature review

The rise of societal and professional initiatives to increase transparency in various contexts has caused scholars to consider the role of transparency in public relations and other contexts. Despite the acknowledgement that transparency leads to positive outcomes for those who employ it, there is a lack of a conceptual consensus regarding what exactly constitutes 'transparency.' For example, transparency has at times been used as a synonym for 'accountability' (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015). While Craft and Heim (2008) agree that transparency is instrumental in the construction of organizational accountability, they assert that transparency and accountability are distinct concepts. Other scholars assert that accountability is an aspect of transparency, and should be included in transparency analysis (Craig, Ngondo, & Flynn, 2016). This is just one example of the disagreement among scholars regarding the nature of transparency. This lack of conceptual consensus coupled with limited empirical investigation inhibits scholarly investigation of transparency as well as practitioners' ability to confidently execute communicative acts that implement organizational approaches that embrace transparency (Williams, 2005).

To better understand how transparency is conceptualized within and across disciplines, Wehmeier and Raaz (2012) conducted a content analysis of academic articles mentioning transparency. Only 13 of the 105 articles in their analysis clearly defined transparency. This highlights a fundamental issue undercutting research on transparency—a lack of conceptual consensus among scholars hinders understanding of the nature of transparency as well as the mechanisms that drive transparency. The extant literature seems to identify three domains within which transparency can be conceptualized—organizational transparency, message transparency, and individual transparency. Each of these domains is discussed in turn.

2.1. Organizational transparency

Broadly, transparency can refer to a set of organizational practices that promote good governance and enhance democratic processes (Christensen & Cheney, 2015). At the organizational level, effective transparency is enacted through a company's willingness to consistently relay transparent information to internal or external publics (Kundeliene & Leitoniene, 2015). Consistent with this perspective, Bushman, Piotroski, and Smith (2004) defined transparency as the accessibility of corporate information to external stakeholders. All of these conceptualizations focus on the organization's inclination to provide the public access to information. An example of access would be an organization providing financial information on its public website, regardless of the factors that might influence the public's interpretation of that information. However, the conceptualization of transparency as mere "access to information" fails to consider the needs and concerns driving the public's desire to have access to this information. Stakeholders need more than just increased amounts of information; they need more useful, intelligible information (Laud & Schepers, 2009). Thus, being transparent in the organizational context should consider the nature of the information provided by the organization, how valuable the public perceives that information, and how easy it is for the public to understand that information (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2015). Such choices matter, as scholarship suggests organizational communication can be technically truthful, but present incomplete or otherwise poorly framed information resulting in harm to an organization's credibility and transparency (Devin, 2016). Additionally, Flyverbom (2016) challenged earlier thinking about organizational transparency works and concluded transparency can also be viewed as supplying information to a public in a timely and consistent manner. Thus, transparency is posited to rest on the disclosure of timely, accurate, reliable, and balanced information (Rawlins, 2009; Williams, 2005). The inclusion of specific message characteristics such as timeliness, accuracy, and providing balanced information (i.e., presenting all sides of an issue) suggests that transparency extends beyond an organization's decisions to commit itself to transparent behavior and indicates that transparency also needs to be conceptualized within a message-centric context.

2.2. Message transparency

In their review article, Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) proposed that information quality is central to conceptualizing transparency. To that end, they highlight three dimensions of information quality that scholars have identified that should contribute to perceptions of transparency—clarity, disclosure, and accuracy. Similarly, Kundeliene and Leitoniene (2015) stated that message features such as accuracy and clarity play a critical role in determining whether a message is transparent. These message features provide a means for conceptualizing transparency at the level of organizational messages as tools for communicating organizational transparency. Each dimension is described below along with an example.

Clarity is identified as the amount of understandability perceived by the information receiver (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson,

2016). Clarity is an important part of information quality in that consumers must have the ability to understand the information being presented (Kundeliene & Leitoniene, 2015). Clarity can be achieved by providing extended explanations, such as in a study on journalistic transparency where accentuated explanation was a defining characteristic of whether or not a news story was considered transparent (Rupar, 2006). Clarity can also be enhanced by avoiding jargon that could hinder the receiver's understanding of the message. For example, the clarity of financial information provided to shareholders could be enhanced by including a letter written in layman's terms that includes supplementary spreadsheet material (Kundeliene & Leitoniene, 2015).

The second dimension of information quality that impacts transparency is disclosure, which refers to the nature of public access to information. As stated previously, a company must be willing to provide information to its stakeholders to be considered transparent (Bushman et al., 2004; Kundeliene & Leitoniene, 2015); concealing information produces biased information, which can decrease transparency (Granados, Gupta, & Kauffman, 2010). Furthermore, Craft and Heim (2008) propose that there is a difference between accessibility of information and disclosure. They state accessibility is passive, while disclosure is an active process of bringing information to light. From a message-centered perspective, disclosure refers to the perceived relevancy and timeliness of information shared by the organization (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). This differs slightly from transparency at the organizational level because the focus is on where, when, and how the information is presented within a message rather than the organization's strategic decision to make the information accessible. An example of disclosure could be an organization prominently displaying negative information about organizational performance on the homepage of the company's website.

The third dimension is accuracy, which is the perception that the information provided by the organization is not just observable, but also valid and truthful (Bernstein, 2012; Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). Thus, if a message is to be considered transparent, it should reflect precise and truthful information (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016), and avoid "half-truths, a term describing communication of technically correct, truthful information that has been, or has the potential to be, undermined by the omission of key information" (Devin, 2016, p. 226). For example, if a company newsletter contained outdated financial information, it would distort the accuracy of that information, which reduces transparency (Granados et al., 2010).

Taken together, clarity, disclosure, and accuracy can be used to determine the level of transparency within a given organizational message through the inclusion of precise, truthful information that message receivers need to make informed decisions or form unbiased perceptions. The level of organizational transparency—as a management strategy—should inform the design of organizational messages; put another way, organizational messages should reflect organizational transparency. However, conceptualizations of transparency within these contexts must also account for differences between the actual message features that are intended to promote transparency perceptions and perceptions of transparency on the part of the message receiver. Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) proposed a conceptual model of the various mechanisms that can be used to manage transparency that incorporates the dimensions of disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. Their model also accounts for how transparency relies on both information quality and receiver perceptions; to this end, they define transparency as "the *perceived* [emphasis added] quality of intentionally shared information from a sender" (p. 5). The idea of *intentionally shared information* implies that the organization will be willing to share access to information, whereas *perceived quality* highlights the importance of the information itself (i.e., the message) and the public's perception of that information at the individual level of message processing. Thus, we conceptualize transparency at the individual level as *perceived transparency*.

2.3. Individual perceptions of transparency

Organizational transparency is only achieved if stakeholders view the organization's efforts as transparent (Rawlins, 2009), with transparency assessments ultimately residing with stakeholders and their perceptions of transparency (Gower, 2006). Therefore, public perceptions of organizational and message transparency are just as important to consider as the organization's motives and actual behaviors regarding sharing of information, as well as the specific message characteristics intended to implement and communicate transparency.

The difference between actual and perceived transparency has been examined in economics, though this body of literature operationalized these concepts on the basis of verifiable economic facts (e.g., knowledge of inflation, etc.). Within public relations scholarship, Rawlins (2008) operationalized perceived organizational transparency based on four dimensions: level of organizational participation, the delivery of substantial information, how accountable the organization is regarding said information, and to what degree the organization is being secretive in their delivery of information. Rawlins also identified various subcomponents of these four overarching factors, including (but not limited to) perceptions of transparency related to *competence of the organization*, *organizational goodwill and integrity*, *overall perceived transparency of the organization*, and the *perceptions of the quality information* delivered to an individual. These five subcomponents of perceived organizational transparency seem to best capture how individuals process perceptions of organizational transparency.

The current study examines transparency at two levels: message transparency and individual perceptions of transparency. There is little consensus regarding what makes a message high or low transparency in nature; therefore, we relied on Schnackenberg and Tomlinson's (2016) conceptual model for guidance and suggest that the message features of clarity, disclosure, and accuracy can be manipulated to create messages that are higher or lower in their level of transparency. Additionally, given that organizational transparency is dependent on the perceptions of stakeholders, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H1. A news release in the high message transparency condition will result in greater perceived organizational transparency than a news release in the low message transparency condition.

Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) also posited that the availability of relevant information can impact perceptions of

transparency. While transparency scholarship typically focuses on what type of content is disseminated by the organization, such as organizational mission statements (Craig, Ngondo, & Flynn, 2016), stakeholders may also seek out or be exposed to information from other sources, independent of the organization's actions (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016). This suggests that other information sources, such as news, could serve as information anchor point that could be used as a basis of comparison for information presented in an organizational message. Encountering alternative sources of information in conjunction with the organization's statement should influence the message recipient's ability to evaluate the level of message transparency and consequently influence the recipient's level of perceived organizational transparency.

H2. There will be an interaction effect between the level of message transparency and whether a news story is placed before or after a news release.

2.4. Organizational credibility

Within the public relations literature, prior research has explored how credibility is influenced by how individuals perceive different types of message features, specifically the feature of source affiliation (Callison, 2001, 2004; Callison & Zillmann, 2002). For example, Callison (2001) found that sources not affiliated with organizations were viewed with higher levels of credibility than organizational sources because of a perception of less inherent bias. Although this specific message factor is not included in the present study, the overall message factor of transparency is expected to have a similar effect on perceptions of organizational credibility. Perceptions of organizational credibility and overall attitudes toward the organization should be positive when a message is high in transparency compared to messages that contain a lower level of transparency. Schnackenberg & Tomlinson (2016) detailed how message features like disclosure, accuracy, and clarity can impact the degree of transparency within a message, and this study expected the manipulation of these message features to impact perceptions of credibility and overall attitudes. By contextualizing past operationalization's of organizational credibility (Callison, Karrh, & Zillmann, 2002) and individual attitudes (Erdem and Swait, 1998, 2004), this study posits the following hypotheses:

H3. A news release in the high message transparency condition will result in more positive perceptions of organizational credibility than a press release in the low message transparency condition.

H4. A news release in the high message transparency condition will result in more positive attitudes toward the organization than a news releases in the low message transparency condition.

3. Methodology

To test the proposed hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment. The study design was a 2 (high vs. low level of message transparency) x 2 (news story placement before or after organizational message) between-subjects design. Qualtrics, an online survey platform, was utilized to present stimuli and a posttest questionnaire. After obtaining approval from our Institutional Review Board, a national sample of 433 respondents was recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and paid \$1 each. Previous research has demonstrated that MTurk is a reliable and valid participant pool when executing online experiments (Mason & Suri, 2012).

3.1. Stimuli

Researchers developed two news releases and one news story for this study. The sponsor of the news release was the hypothetical Seattle Children's Research Institute. The release described a new adolescent depression treatment. In order to manipulate the level of transparency, researchers followed Schnackenberg and Tomlinson's (2016) recommendations and increased levels of clarity, disclosure, and accuracy of the information for the high transparency message and decreased or eliminated those items for the low transparency message. Clarity was manipulated by increasing or decreasing the use of jargon within the press release. Disclosure was manipulated by including or excluding discussion of potential treatment side effects from the press release. Accuracy was manipulated by exaggerating and generalizing figures within the news releases so that any statistical information was more or less precise or more or less accurate when compared against a news story. The news story served as the information anchor—a source of objective, factual information participants could use as a reference point relative to the information that was included in the release. The news story and news releases were equal in length and followed the same inverted pyramid structure and organization of narrative elements.

Prior to the main study, a pre-test was conducted to determine if the manipulation of message transparency was valid. Again, MTurk was utilized to recruit 99 individuals to participate in the pre-test. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of the two versions of the news release and then indicated their agreement with several statements using 7-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). These statements included items such as "Seattle Children's Institute (SCRI) was being transparent in their organizational press release," and "The facts presented by the Seattle Children's Research Institute (SCRI) were accurate." The results showed a statistically significant difference regarding perceptions of message transparency, ($t(96) = 2.12, p = .037$) and perceptions of organizational accuracy, ($t(97) = 2.34, p = .021$). The press release in the high message transparency condition was perceived as more transparent ($M = 5.51, SD = 1.16$) than the press release in the low message transparency condition ($M = 4.94, SD = 1.49$). The press release in the high message transparency condition was also perceived as more accurate ($M = 5.42, SD = 1.07$).

than the press release in the low message transparency condition ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.39$). Based on these pre-test results, the main study was executed using these stimuli to represent the high and low message transparency conditions.

3.2. Procedure

Individuals who were interested in participation were provided with a URL that routed them to the online questionnaire in Qualtrics. Before the participants were able to begin the study, they viewed an informed consent statement and selected 'OK' to accept and continue. Participants viewed one of the two news releases (high or low message transparency) and saw the anchor (objective news story) before or after the news release. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (a) the news story followed by the high message transparency news release, (b) the high message transparency news release followed by the news story, (c) the news story followed by the low message transparency news release, or (d) the low message transparency news release followed by the news story. Thus, the informational anchor (i.e., news story) was randomly presented before or after the news release to account for potential order effects as well as examine the potential impact of priming (Posten et al., 2014). After exposure to both the release and the story, participants answered a series of self-report measures to assess their attitudes toward the organization, perceived organizational transparency, as well as perceived credibility of the organization. Demographic questions appeared after the dependent measures.

3.3. Measures

3.3.1. Attitudes toward the organization

The participants' attitudes toward the organization were measured using a 9-point Likert-type scale (Erdem and Swait, 1998, 2004). Participants were asked to report their agreement with the following items (1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree): "This organization delivers what it promises," "This organization's claims are believable," "This organization has a name you can trust," "This organization doesn't pretend to be something it isn't," "This organization is committed to delivering on its claims, no more and no less," and "This organization has the ability to deliver what it promises." Cronbach's α for attitude toward the organization was .931.

3.3.2. Perceived organizational transparency

The level of perceived organizational transparency using items from Rawlins (2008) and measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Participants reported their agreement on 17 items such as, "The organization wants to be accountable to people like me for its actions," "The organization wants people like me to know what it is doing and why it is doing it," and "The organization provides information that is easy for people like me to understand."

It should be noted that Rawlins (2008) initially developed a 38-item questionnaire meant to measure perceptions of transparency, with the overall scale consisting of nine subscales. Not all of the subscales were included in this study for a few reasons. First, the overall questionnaire consisted of 75 questions with the inclusion of all subscales; therefore, participant fatigue was a concern. Second, the model we used (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016) did not necessitate using all the Rawlins (2008) subscales. Therefore, the subscales regarding competence, goodwill, integrity, overall transparency, and information (Rawlins, 2008) were used to create a composite organizational transparency measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = .965$).

3.3.3. Organizational credibility

To determine the participants' level of perceived organizational credibility, Callison et al. (2002) source credibility scale was modified for relevancy in the current study. An eleven-point semantic differential scale was used; anchors for the scale included: "transparent-not transparent," "accurate-not accurate," "helpful-not helpful at all," and "extremely trustworthy-not trustworthy at all" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .960$).

4. Results

A total of 433 participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Participants who completed the experiment in fewer than 3 min were considered "speeders" and were discarded. The mean completion time was computed, and those in the lowest quartile (i.e. under three minutes) were considered participants who were speeding through. A total of 76 participants were removed, resulting in 357 cases that were used for analysis. The sample was 53.8% male and 46.2% female. Less than 1% of the participants did not graduate high school, 11.8% graduated from high school, 30.4% attended college, 46.2% graduated from college, and 11% received a post-graduate degree. In terms of income, 34.3% made \$30,000 or less, 32.3% made between \$30,000 and \$60,000, and 33.4% made \$60,000 or more.

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the effects that level of message transparency and placement of the news story had on overall perception of organizational transparency (see Table 1). Results showed a significant main effect of level of message transparency on perceptions of organizational transparency, $F(1,353) = 5.51$, $p = .019$, $\eta^2 = .015$. In the high message transparency condition ($M = 5.438$, $SD = .865$), perceptions of organizational transparency were significantly different when compared to the low message transparency condition ($M = 5.197$, $SD = 1.11$). Based on these results, hypothesis 1 was supported. Individuals in the high message transparency condition perceived the statement by the organization as more transparent, thus showing that transparency can be manipulated through message design features. There was no significant main effect of news

Table 1
Two-Way Analysis of Variance Examining the Effect of Message Transparency and News Anchor Placement on Perception of Organizational Transparency.

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Message Transparency	1	5.392	5.392	5.51	.019
News Anchor Placement	1	3.279	3.279	3.351	.068
Interaction Effect	1	4.569	4.569	4.669	.031
Error	353	345.430	.979		
Total	356	358.439			

story placement, $F(1,353) = 3.35, p = .068, \eta^2 = .009$.

There was a significant interaction effect of level of message transparency and news story placement on the dependent variable perceptions of organizational transparency, $F(1) = 4.669, p = .031, \eta^2 = .013$. When the news story came before the statement by the organization, perceptions of organizational transparency in the high transparency condition ($M = 5.455, SD = .87$) were significantly different compared to the low transparency condition ($M = 4.98, SD = 1.18$). Based on these results, hypothesis 2 was supported. Participants who saw a news story before the organizational statement in the low message transparency condition perceived organizational transparency to be lower than those in the high message transparency condition. There was no significant difference in perceived organizational transparency when the news story came after the press release.

The impact of level of message transparency and news story placement on attitude toward the organization was also explored (see Table 2). A significant main effect of level of message transparency was found $F(1,353) = 5.958, p = .015, \eta^2 = .017$. Participants in the high message transparency condition ($M = 6.93, SD = 1.38$) expressed more positive attitudes toward the organization than those in the low message transparency condition ($M = 6.58, SD = 1.52$). These findings supported hypothesis 3. Participants in the high message transparency condition had more positive attitudes toward Seattle Children's Research Institute than those in the low message transparency condition. There was no significant main effect of news story placement or an interaction effect of level of transparency and news story placement.

Level of message transparency and news story placement were also analyzed in respect to perception of the organization's credibility (see Table 3). There was a significant main effect of level of transparency on credibility ($F(1,353) = 12.52, p = .000, \eta^2 = .034$). Participants in the high message transparency condition ($M = 7.59, SD = 1.97$) had perceived the organization to be more credible as compared to those in the low message transparency condition ($M = 6.81, SD = 2.19$). These results supported hypothesis 4. Participants who saw a news release that incorporated transparent message features perceived the Seattle Children's Research Institute as more credible than those in the low message transparency condition. There was no significant main effect of news story placement nor was there an interaction effect for news story placement and level of message transparency.

5. Discussion

The findings support the premise that when organizational messages exhibit features intended to communicate greater levels of transparency, then message receivers perceive the organization sponsoring the message as more transparent and more credible, as well as displaying more positive attitudes toward the organization. The presentation of an information anchor—here, in the form of a news story—only influenced perceived transparency when the anchor appeared before the organizational message, but not after it. An anchor placed before a high message transparency news release resulted in the organization being perceived as more transparent than when the news release appeared after the message. Conversely, an anchor appearing before a low message transparency news release resulted in the organization being perceived as less transparent than when the anchor followed the message.

5.1. Implications

The findings support and extend existing research regarding the role of transparency in organizational public relations and strategic communication efforts. Most significantly, our study demonstrates empirically that organizational messages designed to be more transparent via inclusion of message features such as the use of disclosure, greater clarity, and greater accuracy result in positive outcomes for an organization such as increased perceptions of organizational transparency. These findings lend empirical support for the conceptual model of transparency posited by Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016). This is important in that the study confirms

Table 2
Two-Way Analysis of Variance Examining the Effect of Message Transparency and News Anchor Placement on Attitude Toward the Organization.

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Message Transparency	1	11.777	11.777	5.958	.015
News Anchor Placement	1	6.918	6.918	3.50	.062
Interaction Effect	1	4.562	4.562	2.308	.130
Error	353	697.713	1.977		
Total	356	720.582			

Table 3
Two-Way Analysis of Variance Examining the Effect of Message Transparency and News Anchor Placement on Perception of Organizational Credibility.

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Message Transparency	1	54.130	54.130	12.52	.000
News Anchor Placement	1	6.051	6.051	1.40	.238
Interaction Effect	1	6.435	6.435	1.488	.223
Error	353	1526.175	4.323		
Total	356	1591.941			

that an organization's strategic decision to be transparent can be communicated to the public at tactical level via decisions regarding message design. The distinction among actual transparency, message transparency, and perceived organizational transparency is a critical, and underscores the importance of [Craft and Heim's \(2008\)](#) observation that being transparent rests not only on what to be transparent about, but also how to be transparent. The findings of this study address the “how” question and would suggest that it's not enough for an organization to intend to be transparent—organizations must ensure that their communication efforts exhibit features that clearly convey a transparent stance via message design.

Another implication of the findings in this study is that exposure to media coverage of an issue or organization could potentially prime receivers to search for transparency cues when subsequently exposed to messages from the same organization on the same topic ([Posten et al., 2014](#)). As noted above, the placement of a news story before the news release increased perceived organizational transparency of releases that incorporated greater clarity, accuracy, and disclosure. Conversely, seeing the news story prior to a news release that was included greater inaccuracy, less clarity, and no disclosure resulted in decreased perceptions of organizational transparency. Exposure to the news story after reading the news release had no influence on perceived organizational transparency—regardless of the inclusion or exclusion of message features intended to communicate message transparency. Thus, it seems plausible that creating a favorable media environment in which a transparent message is transmitted would be a paramount concern for public relations practitioners. Furthermore, practitioners need to consider whether the information they are distributing is leading or trailing media coverage that includes similar information. If the media is leading the discussion, then it is incumbent on practitioners to ensure that transparency cues are evident in the message. If the objective is to avoid media coverage influencing perceptions of transparency, the findings of this study would suggest that the priority would then be to get the organizational message out first to set the initial tone. These findings have implications for a variety of theories used to understand public relations activities, including theoretical approaches that examine the role of practitioners as frame strategists engage in framing competitions ([Hallahan, 1999](#)); not only should practitioners be concerned about framing issues of concern to the organization, but effective framing of the organization's approach to transparency is necessary as well ([Devlin, 2016](#)).

The findings also have significant theoretical implications for the broader public relations scholarship, particularly in regard to models of organization-public relationships (OPR), relationship management theory ([Ledingham, 2006](#)), and dialogic approaches to public relations practice ([Kent & Taylor, 2002](#)). Existing models of OPRs ([Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000](#); [Grunig & Huang, 2000](#)) suggest that organizations use a number of cultivation strategies to manage their relationships with publics, with cultivation strategies that are two-way symmetrical in nature more likely to result in positive relational outcomes such as trust, commitment, and satisfaction. This includes a number of strategies that would seem to be rooted in, dependent on, or potentially bolstered by an organizational commitment to transparency. For instance, the cultivation strategies of “access” and “openness” would seem closely related with information accessibility and disclosure. Thus, it is possible that cultivation strategies—like the strategic orientation toward transparency in this study—would rely on message tactics exhibiting transparent message design features to be implemented. This would also render cultivation strategies as being susceptible to the same “actual” versus “perceived” distinction. By extension, actual organizational decisions to enact cultivation strategies to promote healthy OPRs may or may not be perceived as such if the communication efforts targeting relevant publics do not effectively incorporate appropriate message design features so that these strategies are perceived as intended.

Along similar lines, relationship management theory suggests that managing OPRs around common goals results in mutual understanding and positive outcomes for both parties in the relationship ([Ledingham, 2003, 2006](#)). Again, transparency would seem critical to effectively generating true consensus regarding motives, goals, and interests between organizations and publics. Likewise, scholarship on dialogic communication (e.g., [Kent & Taylor, 2002](#); [Taylor & Kent, 2014](#)), another pervasive theoretical framework within the public relations literature, would also seem to rely on and be impacted by the conceptualization and operationalization of transparency. [Taylor and Kent \(2014\)](#) describe dialogue as “an orientation to other people that recognizes their inherent self-worth, and is an ethical process of communication.... Dialogue is considered one of the most ethical forms of communication because it serves to mitigate power relationships, values individual dignity and self-worth, and tries to involve participants in conversation and decision-making” (p. 388). Because practicing transparency helps organizations fulfill an ethical obligation to stakeholders, in part by providing them with timely, important information ([Craft & Heim, 2008](#); [Schnackenberg & Tomlinson, 2016](#); [Sisson, 2017](#); [Tsetsura & Aziz, 2017](#)), it would seem that transparency is essential for effectively engaging in dialogue. Given the critical role transparency plays in these various public relations paradigms and theories, having a clear understanding of what transparency is, how it is implemented, how it is perceived, and the outcomes of those perceptions would position transparency as central to public relations scholarship. The current study's findings take a step toward better understanding this phenomenon.

From a practitioner perspective, understanding how organizational messages impact target publics is a key concern of public

relations practitioners developing ways to maintain positive stakeholder relations and cultivate positive reputations. Thus, organizations interested in predicting relationship outcomes based on organizational communication efforts should invest in formative research investigating message design features that can positively influence target publics' attitudes and behaviors and their perceptions of organizational transparency.

5.2. Limitations and future research

As with all research, this study has several limitations; however, the limitations explored here provide arenas for future studies into perceptions of messages designed to convey organizational transparency. First, we only created messages that were either designed to be high or low in transparency due to the presence or absence of features that conveyed greater transparency. Thus, future studies should seek to independently manipulate individual message features of clarity, accuracy, and disclosure to determine if specific message features play a more prominent role in conveying transparency than other message features. In addition, future studies should seek to identify what impact messages that are moderately transparent have on receiver perceptions.

A second limitation of the study is the exclusive use of a single organization (Seattle Children's Research Institute) and a single message (announcement regarding a new treatment for adolescent mental health) conveyed via one form of organizational media (a news release) and anchored by one form of objective, comparative information (a news story). It is possible that the observed results are idiosyncratic and related to the specific context used in the study. It is also noteworthy that in this study, the means for perceived transparency were above the scale midpoint even for the low message transparency conditions and regardless of anchor placement. It is possible that message receivers give some organizations the benefit of the doubt when it comes to assessing transparency—that is to say, there may be a “transparency bias” afforded certain types of organizations under certain circumstances. Some organizations—such as a children's hospital or a religious nonprofit—may be perceived as transparent by default. Meanwhile, other organizations—such as political parties or financial institutions—may be assumed to be inherently non-transparent. Similarly, it may be the case that some publics would tolerate non-transparent behavior under certain circumstances—for instance, in situations where information clearly cannot be divulged for moral, ethical, or legal reasons.

Therefore, future research should investigate the impact of message transparency across different contexts by varying organization type, topic, and message format. In particular, it would be useful to see if different public relations media might be more or less effective at conveying transparency; Hallahan's (2010) integrated public relations media model could provide a useful framework for this investigation. It would also be of critical importance to vary the organization, issue, and message topic to see if issue relevance moderates the relationship between message and perceived transparency when different issues become the focus of organizational messages.

Another limitation of the study is the use of a hypothetical organization as the message sponsor in our stimulus material. We made this decision with the intention of eliminating the influence of any preexisting knowledge and biases on the participants' perception of the organization; however, this also had the effect of limiting our ability to observe the impact of familiarity and organizational history on perceived message transparency. Future studies should consider either using real organizations or using hypothetical organizations but manipulating participants' knowledge of these organizations. It is not hard to imagine a model similar to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory in which organizational history in regard to prior instances of transparency (or non-transparency) and relational history could influence which types of message strategies can be used to most effectively convey transparency or counter accusations of a lack of transparency (Coombs, 2004). Further, although the differences between the high and low message transparency conditions was statistically significant, participants still viewed the news releases in the low message transparency condition as marginally transparent in both the pre-test and main study. Future experimental research must look for ways to improve manipulations by driving low and high transparency messages further apart.

6. Conclusion

Transparency has long been considered a normative goal for organizations to pursue in the interest of acting ethically, demonstrating accountability, and building positive reputational and experiential relationships with stakeholders. Transparency has also been lauded for its ability to promote positive perceptions of organizational credibility and trust. The current study put transparency to the test by examining the influence of the level of message transparency and concomitant message features on perceptions of organizational transparency, attitude toward the organization, and organizational credibility. The findings suggest that practitioners need to endeavor to develop organizational messages that provide unambiguous cues regarding an organization's stance toward transparency—not only because greater message transparency results in more positive outcomes for the organization, but also because preexisting media coverage of issues and topics that are the subject of related organizational messaging can exacerbate the impact of transparent—or non-transparent—messages on perceptions of organizational transparency. Scholars and practitioners would be well advised to continue to move beyond calls to simply engage in “transparency” and to extend the investigation of the nuanced, inner-workings of transparent communication to reap the benefits of an organization's commitment to greater transparency.

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