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How CEO Social Media Disclosure and Gender Affect Perceived CEO Attributes, Relationship Investment, and Engagement Intention

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Abstract

How does a chief executive officer (CEO)'s social media content disclosure on Twitter affect perceived CEO attributes, relationship investment, and public engagement, and to what extent does the CEO's gender (male vs. female) moderate how publics evaluate content disclosures? A 2 (CEO gender: male vs. female) × 4 (level of disclosure: 100% corporate vs. 70% corporate and 30% personal vs. 30% corporate and 70% personal vs. 100% personal disclosure) between-subject experimental design was used to address these questions with a random sample of 465 adult Twitter users in the United States. Results showed that posts that featured high personal disclosure did not increase the perceived likability or competence of the CEO. Nor did CEO gender impact these outcomes. However, CEO professional disclosure proved to be an effective means to gain high levels of perceived relationship investment from publics. Finally, publics may hold implicit gender bias in cognitive (i.e., perceived relationship investment) and behavioral evaluation (i.e., engagement intention) of a female CEO.

Keywords

leadership communication, social media, gendered leadership, disclosure, relationship management, engagement

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Scholars recently have shown interest in executive social media communication and its impact on corporate reputation, organization–public relationships, and public engagement (e.g., Huang & Yeo, 2018; Men et al., 2018; Yue et al., 2019). Many argue that chief executive officer (CEO) engagement on social media humanizes the CEO and the company. The resulting psychological intimacy between the CEO and publics in turn helps build rapport and organizational identification (Yue et al., 2019). The trend of CEO disclosure and advocacy about personal and corporate values is more pronounced recently as more CEOs have publicly spoken out on social and political issues on and offline (Weber Shandwick and KRC Research, 2018).

The purpose of this study is twofold: First, it is a response to the call for insight into the CEO role as "Chief Engagement Officers" (Edelman, 2014) with a focus on CEOs' social media content disclosure as a tool for branding and public relations. Informed by self-disclosure literature and social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994), we explored how CEOs' levels of personal disclosure affect perceived CEO attributes, perceived relationship investment (PRI), and public engagement intention. Second, it taps into the less discussed issue of CEO gender in the context of social media communication. Researchers have observed perceived gender roles directly impacting the effectiveness of social media messages primarily in political arenas (e.g., McGregor & Mourão, 2016), and there is a practical need to understand whether the same process occurs with publics' perceptions of business leaders. To this end, we draw upon role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) to examine how CEO gender may moderate publics' evaluation of various content disclosures. This study presents one of the first empirical investigations of the independent and joint effects of disclosure type and discloser gender on key personal and organizational level outcomes in the context of executive social media communication. Theoretically, this study advances knowledge in computer-mediated communication, gendered leadership, and public relations management. Not only does this research enrich social penetration theory by applying and testing its tenets in mediated communication context, it also demonstrates its utility and potential as a theoretical framework in studying leadership communication. In addition, the inclusion of role congruity theory integrates research in gender, leadership, and strategic communication. Finally, we provide strategic guidelines for executive leaders and public relations professionals regarding types of messages to disclose, potential issues and concerns related to discloser gender, and how these factors all tie together to affect key outcomes organizations care about.

Literature Review

In 2019, an estimated 2.95 billion people used social media worldwide. This number was projected to increase to 3.43 billion in 2023 (Statista, 2020). As of 2019, 262 million International Twitter users (outside the United States) made up 79% of all Twitter accounts (Omnicore, 2020). Leaders across the world and from all walks of life have been responsive to this opportunity. Political, business, and religious leaders leverage these platforms to facilitate "direct, personal, and potentially interactive" communication with various audiences (Lee & Oh, 2012, p. 932). Industry reports have shown that most C-suite executives are aware of the potential benefits of social media presence and engagement. For instance, one study done by Brandfog (2013) revealed that more than 80% of surveyed CEOs consider social media channels to be effective in engaging with multiple stakeholders and communicating company vision and mission, and thus increasing brand loyalty. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2014) used the term "Chief Engagement Officer" to emphasize CEOs' engagement responsibility. Similarly, a Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations (2012) study found that top leaders rated the importance of digital media engagement significantly higher than those at other levels. Relationship building also has been identified as a key dimension of excellent leadership in public relations (Meng & Berger, 2013). Edelman's 2016 report continued to highlight that to build trust, CEOs must give nonbusiness updates, including content about their personal values, success stories, and failures.

Dutta (2010) articulated three reasons why senior leaders' social media communication matters. First, social media offer low-cost platforms to build leaders' personal brand both within and outside the company. Second, social media's inherent attributes—such as simultaneity and transparency—help leaders engage with stakeholders of diverse profiles, including employees, customers, and peers. Third, social media provide a rare opportunity for leaders to listen to unfiltered public voices directly. For instance, CEOs such as Airbnb's Brian Chesky and Slack's Stewart Butterfield have solicited feedback for the company's marketing strategies on Twitter. Empirical research consistently has shown that senior leaders who know how to leverage social media can generate substantial public relations benefits for themselves and their organizations (Alghawi et al., 2014; Yue et al., 2019). For instance, CEOs who are assertive and responsive on social media can foster parasocial interaction, which in turn can lead to organization–public relational outcomes such as trust and satisfaction (Tsai & Men, 2017). Finally, the push also comes from the broader socioeconomic environment consisting of media, consumers, community members, regulatory entities, and advocacy groups. Social media empower publics as they demand more authenticity and transparency from organizations. As a result, publics increasingly expect to gain greater access to the insights of corporate leadership in open communications.

Despite its importance, many questions remain about how CEO adoption of social media for direct communication with publics can best be practiced (Alghawi et al., 2014; Brandfog, 2013; CEO.com and DOMO, 2016). The 2016 Social CEO Report showed that only 40% of *Fortune 500* CEOs were active on any social media platforms. In the case of Twitter, researchers more recently found that just 36 *Fortune 500* CEOs had any presence, and among those, only 25 were active users (Yue et al., 2019). Reasons for the slow adoption of social media use include "risk aversion, time constraints, fear of negative feedback, and a lack of a social media strategy" (Brandfog, 2013, p. 1). Likewise, scholars (e.g., Alghawi et al., 2014; DiStaso et al., 2011) have concurred that a shortage of established rules and strategies about how to communicate on social media contributes to the reluctance of executives to adopt social media. Despite the low participation, there is a growing consensus on the value of social media among senior leaders. This contrast highlights the greater need for researchers to provide evidence-based guidelines for CEOs and their communication teams (Yue et al., 2019). Whether the content CEOs post is better off being professional and corporate or casual and personal remains an underexplored area with great potential in providing insight and guidance for effective executive social media communication and therefore constitutes one key focus of the current study.

Disclosure Defined

Self-disclosure, or disclosure of personal information, has been a focus of research in psychology, sociology, and communication and has been defined as the "act of revealing personal information about oneself to another" (Collins & Miller, 1994, p. 457). Others describe it as "an interaction between at least two individuals where one intends to deliberately divulge something personal to another" (Greene et al., 2006, p. 411) and "the process that grants access to private things and to secrets" (Rosenfeld, 2000, p. 6).

According to social penetration theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973), disclosure is the foundation of interpersonal relationships. To elaborate, relationships between individuals evolve from nonintimate to intimate levels (depth), and from narrow to broad levels (breadth), primarily through revealing personal information including highly sensitive information (e.g., deeply held values, religious beliefs, political views) or superficial ones (e.g., "I love the new Lego Movie"; Greene et al., 2006). Levesque et al. (2002) found that revealing intimate, evaluative information is more impactful for strong interpersonal relationships than sharing generic, descriptive information. Prior research pinpointed the role of self-disclosure in enhancing relational satisfaction, intimacy, and liking of the discloser (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994). In examining gender differences in the disclosure-liking relationship, research shows that the relationship between disclosure and liking is stronger for female than for male disclosers (Collins & Miller, 1994). They attributed this finding to traditional gender role stereotypes that females are more skillful communicators than males, and that males may be perceived as maladjusted if they do disclose. However, not all personal disclosure leads to positive outcomes. In early relationships, too much personal disclosure is considered inappropriate, and the discloser is liked less (Greene et al., 2006).

Self-disclosure theories also have been applied in computer-mediated communication (e.g., Bazarova, 2012; Gibbs et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2018). As Gibbs et al. (2006) described, the internet is "an exciting new realm in which to reexamine traditional interpersonal theories of self-disclosure and relationship formation" (p. 152). Indeed, scholars have explored the function and impact of interpersonal communication features, such as interactivity, conversational tone, dialogic communication, and emotional and functional language, on web and social media sites (e.g., Kelleher, 2009; Sung & Kim, 2018; Yue et al., 2019). Research on parasocial interaction (PSI) is instrumental in understanding how interaction and relationship are conveyed and cultivated through mediated communication. PSI refers to "a user's interpersonal involvement with a media personality through mediated communication" (Tsai & Men, 2017, p. 1852). Research shows that even when the interaction between communicators and audience is one-way, controlled, and non-reciprocal, audience members may nonetheless develop illusory, quasi-intimate relationships with communicators and media personalities (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and that this phenomenon extends to social media (Lee et al., 2018). More importantly, parasocial relationships are "not qualitatively different from ordinary interpersonal relationships" (Lee et al., 2018, p. 3), as they engender similar outcomes, some of which are reviewed below.

Contemporary scholarship has looked at how levels of self-disclosure, disclosure content, and gender of discloser, independently or collectively, affect publics' perceptions of the discloser and relational outcomes on social media. Karlsen and Enjolras (2016) found that Norway's most influential politicians primarily exhibited their professional side (i.e., conversations on politics) on Twitter. Fountaine (2017) examined how young female politicians framed themselves in an election campaign on Twitter and found they promoted themselves as "likable, busy, and relational politicians" (p. 232). Tsai and Men (2017) suggested that responsive CEOs who communicate personal messages in a friendly and compassionate manner on social media tend to generate trust and satisfaction. Lee and Oh (2012) studied politicians' Twitter communication and found that personalized (vs. depersonalized) posts enhanced perceived intimacy with the politicians among those who favor interpersonal connections. In aggregate, literature suggests that personal disclosure produces positive outcomes, whether they are relational outcomes (e.g., trust, satisfaction, closeness, engagement) or attributes of the communicator (e.g., likability). However, it remains unclear whether this works equally for male and female CEOs. Several studies suggest that the effect of personal disclosure may vary by the gender of the discloser (e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994; Lee et al., 2018). Next, we review literature at the intersection of gender, management, and leadership.

Role Congruity Theory

One of the major theoretical frameworks in gender and leadership scholarship is Eagly and Karau's (2002) role congruity theory. According to this theory, prejudice against female leaders occurs when there is a perceived mismatch or incongruity between expectations about female gender roles and the leadership roles, which are generally perceived to be agentic and masculine and emphasize power and authority (Rudman et al., 2012). Historically, in Western societies, the prescriptive roles of women have been associated with being nurturing, sensitive, caring, communal, and relations-oriented (e.g., homemakers), and men have been associated with traits such as being dominant, assertive, and independent (e.g., breadwinners, leaders; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Thus, there is much closer role alignment between the male gender stereotypes and expectations of leadership behaviors as both highlight attributes associated with independence, force, and competence (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The outcome of role incongruity for females is that they are perceived as possessing less leadership ability (Rosette & Tost, 2010).

Moreover, female leaders who do exhibit agentic behaviors, which violate the prescriptive component of gender stereotypes, suffer from discrimination and social penalties, referred to as "backlash effects" (Rudman, 1998) for deviating from gender role expectations (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). For instance, these female leaders have been assigned negative interpersonal characterizations such as "bitchy," "selfish," "ice-queens," and "battle-axes," (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010, p. 924) and are perceived as "insufficiently communal" (Rosette & Tost, 2010, p. 223). They also may face social rejection and lose career-relevant opportunities and rewards such as being recommended for hiring and promotion (Rudman, 1998). These backlash effects can be further illustrated by what scholars call the female double-bind.

Female Double-Bind: Likability Versus Competence

A double bind occurs when "a person cannot win no matter what [he]/she does" (Oakley, 2000, p. 324). Jamieson (1995) pointed out a particularly troublesome double-bind for female leaders—the femininity/competency bind, also known as a "catch-22" (Phelan et al., 2008) or "double-edged sword" (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Female leaders face this double-bind because when they come across as confident and ambitious, they risk the backlash of being deficient in social skills and likability (Phelan et al., 2008). However, when they exhibit stereotypically feminine behaviors as leaders, they are deemed less competent.

This double-bind has appeared in many social media studies. For instance, Meeks (2016) revealed that male political candidates benefit from personalization in their tweets more than their female counterparts, even though the most successful politicians on Twitter stay in the political realm with issues-focused tweets (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016). Lee et al. (2018) found that a male politician's personal revelations on social media heightened his likability and competency to a greater extent compared with a female.

Integrating empirical findings from self-disclosure, gender, and leadership literature, we argue that male CEOs who are traditionally regarded as determined, independent, and assertive figures may incur a positive expectancy violation in the minds of publics for being relatable, personable, and communal. Thus, disclosing personal life and opinions should substantially increase the perceived likability of male CEOs.

Meanwhile, we argue that female CEOs displaying communality through posts featured by personal revelations may also increase their likability (especially when compared with posting only about the company). Empirical studies have supported this argument, highlighting that when female leaders provide verification of communality (e.g., information about the CEO as a mother) in a traditionally male job, negative affect toward them decreases (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). We predict that while personal disclosures are beneficial for both male and female CEOs, a male CEO will benefit more from a positive violation of his traditional agentic image than a female CEO. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: A CEO's personal disclosure heightens likability as compared with corporate disclosure, and such effects are more pronounced for a male than a female CEO.

Self-presentation for female political candidates is "a delicate balancing act" (McGregor & Mourão, 2016, p. 2) as they may risk sacrificing competence and effectiveness in exchange for likability. Indeed, Lee et al.'s (2018) study revealed that female politicians are viewed as less competent when they disclose personal information on social media, an act which also has been negatively linked to participants' intention to vote for her. Thus, consistent with role congruity theory, an argument can be made that female CEOs who adopt a communal, personal online strategy may be viewed as less competent, a validation of the traditional gender norm that women fit better in the private sphere than in a public/leadership role (Yaniv & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2016). Nevertheless, a different view from the management literature suggests that women leaders who successfully occupy *top* positions in companies overcome double standards to arrive at the top, and may therefore be perceived to possess high skill, ability, and deservingness (Crocker & Major, 1989). Rosette and Tost (2010) reinforced this perspective by conducting a series of experiments that showed gender biases may not apply to female leaders at the very top level of organizations (as opposed to mid-level managers) when they are credited with high performance and success. They further found that senior female leaders are evaluated more highly on overall leadership effectiveness than their male peers and female middle managers. Thus, role congruity theory and this top "female leader advantage" perspective (Eagly & Carli, 2003) seem to contradict and point to different evaluation outcomes for female top leaders especially regarding performance-related attributions such as leadership effectiveness and competence. Given that there are theoretical justifications supporting both increased and decreased competence evaluations of female CEOs, we treat this issue as the following research question:

> **RQ1:** Will publics' evaluations of a female CEO's competence differ based on her different levels of personal disclosure?

We previously argued that a male CEO with higher levels of personal disclosure should be viewed more likable due to positive expectancy violation of a male's gender role norm. We believe the same positive expectancy violation would occur with ratings on a male CEO's competence. Thus, the following hypothesis is posed:

> **H2:** There is a positive relationship between a male CEO's level of personal disclosure and publics' evaluation of the CEO's competence such that more personal disclosure from a male CEO leads to higher perceived competence.

In addition to examining publics' evaluations of CEO attributes (e.g., likeability, competence) and in light of the goal of public relations to contribute to organizational effectiveness, we turn to *PRI* and *engagement intention* as outcomes more relevant to public relations and organizations on a broader level.

PRI

Originally a construct used in marketing research, PRI has drawn attention from public relations and strategic communication scholars in recent years (e.g., Cho & Auger, 2013; Sung & Kim, 2018). Originated by De Wulf et al. (2001) in examining supplier–consumer interaction, PRI refers to "a consumer's perception of the extent to which a retailer devotes resources, efforts, and attention aimed at maintaining or enhancing relationships with regular customers that do not have outside value and cannot be recovered if these relationships are terminated" (p. 35). Based on the principle of reciprocity, perceived high level of investment of an organization/brand in building relationships with stakeholders can elicit stakeholders' psychological bonds and obligations to reciprocate, which in turn foster positive relationship outcomes (e.g., Cho & Auger, 2013; De Wulf et al., 2001; Sung & Kim, 2018) and behavioral loyalty to the organization/brand (De Wulf et al., 2001). Thus, to identify which communication strategies, or more precisely, types of disclosure CEOs should adopt to foster PRI is a key step in inducing quality organization–public relationships (OPRs).

This article focuses on PRI instead of relationship quality indicators (i.e., trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality), despite the latter having been in the spotlight of public relations research since Ferguson's call for relationship as a research paradigm in 1984 (Ferguson, 2018). Although concurring that a key value of public relations lies in creating, managing, and maintaining quality OPRs, we also support Cho and Auger's argument that relationship management efforts "are validated only if the publics recognize these efforts" (2013, p. 259). Indeed, relationship outcomes indicated by trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality cannot be realized if publics do not first form beliefs or impressions of the organizational/leadership efforts. Therefore, not only is it valuable to explore publics' *cognitive* responses to CEOs' relationship-building efforts through social media communication, it is also necessary to focus on PRI especially when OPRs may not have emerged due to either time or platform constraints. As such, it would not be appropriate or accurate to ask publics about their relationship quality with corporate executives under the current study context and design.

CEOs' personal disclosure on social media is associated with publics' trust and satisfaction with CEOs' companies (Tsai & Men, 2017). In addition, disclosing intimate information creates a feeling of relationship specialness and personal connection from perceivers' standpoint (Lee & Oh, 2012). Nevertheless, no study to our knowledge has explored the relationship between different levels of self-disclosure and PRI. Drawing upon De Wulf et al. (2001), we define PRI as publics' perception of the extent to which a CEO and his or her company devote resources, efforts and attention aimed at maintaining or enhancing relationships with publics. Due to the distinct theorization of PRI from other relationship concepts (e.g., OPRs) and a lack of empirical evidence leading us to make directional predictions, we ask the following research question:

> **RQ2:** What is the relationship between a CEO's levels of personal disclosure and PRI?

Furthermore, based on prior review of the impact of discloser's gender on perceived likability and competence, CEO gender also may affect publics' perceptions of the relationship investment, either independently or jointly, with the CEO's levels of personal disclosure. Therefore, we ask the following research questions:

RQ3: How does CEO gender affect PRI?
RQ4: Is there a two-way interaction between a CEO's levels of personal disclosure and CEO gender on PRI?

Engagement Intention

Public engagement has been a focal construct in public relations due to its powerful role in engendering publics' supportive behaviors (Kang, 2014) and in enhancing OPRs (Men & Tsai, 2014). The amount of time and effort that publics are willing to invest voluntarily in interacting with an organization or individual has served as an indicator of public engagement on social media. Researchers use several behavioral indicators to delineate the activeness levels of public engagement, ranging from passive content consumption (e.g., viewing posts) to active content contribution (e.g., liking, commenting, sharing posts; Men et al., 2018).

To better understand how different levels of CEO personal disclosure and CEO gender may lead to engagement with publics, this study expands the operational definition of public engagement intention to also include public's willingness to *follow* the CEO and the CEO's company on social media. Following a CEO on social media may be an early step toward deeper levels of engagement that include liking, sharing, and commenting on the CEO's posts. However, the act of following has not been incorporated as an engagement indicator in existing executive social media studies. In addition, we refine the definition to entail how likely publics are to search for more information about the CEO and the company, such as going to the CEO's official webpage or other social media accounts. In doing so, we recognize the spillover effect of engagement from a single platform to other forms of online or offline engagement and therefore extend the parameter of engagement intention to a broader range of engagement activities.

Regarding the impact of executives' online disclosure on public engagement outcomes, research has yielded mixed results. Alghawi et al. (2014) found that CEOs who posted highly professional content on their microblogs are more likely to foster followers' loyalties to their microblogs as manifested in continued "visit, listen, follow, post, forward, and reply" behavior (p. 186). Huang and Yeo's (2018) findings also revealed that when CEOs posted professional insights, such as messages about companies' vision and mission, they were more likely to get retweets. On the contrary, posting personal-life and status updates was not as effective in getting retweets. However, Men et al.'s (2018) investigation of social CEO communication on Facebook suggested that both professional and personal-life posts enhanced public engagement, measured by total number of likes, shares, and comments, and reactions. To answer the question of whether personal disclosure (vs. corporate disclosure) is a benefit or a risk in generating engagement and to further explore the gender effect, we ask the following research questions:

> **RQ5:** What is the relationship between a CEO's levels of personal disclosure and public engagement intention?
> **RQ6:** How does CEO gender affect public engagement intention?
> **RQ7:** Is there a two-way interaction between a CEO's levels of personal disclosure and CEO gender on public engagement intention?

Method

Pretest

Ten posts demonstrating personal disclosure and 10 posts demonstrating corporate disclosure were selected from real CEOs' Twitter posts with some wording changed to fit with a fictitious company. To ensure that the 10 personal and 10 corporate disclosure posts researchers picked as part of experimental stimuli were valid and viewed as such by participants, we conducted a pilot study. One hundred respondents recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk were randomly assigned to read either 10 personal disclosure posts or 10 corporate disclosure posts. They then evaluated 10 posts on the following 7-point bipolar scales: "nonintimate–intimate," "impersonal–personal," "public–private," and "superficial–in-depth" (Bazarova, 2012; Lee et al., 2018; α = .82). We used a gender-neutral name, J. Murphy, as the CEO of the fictitious "Meta Connect Corporation" and a blurred gender-neutral CEO profile picture.

A series of independent samples *t* tests were conducted. The results revealed the composite mean between personal disclosure ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.30$) and corporate disclosure ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.18$) was statistically significant, $t(98) = 2.65$, $p < .01$. As compared with 10 corporate disclosure posts, 10 personal disclosure posts were perceived as more intimate, $t(98) = 2.61$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{personal}} = 4.60$, $SD = 1.43$ versus $M_{\text{corporate}} = 3.64$, $SD = 1.56$, more personal, $t(98) = 2.61$, $p < .05$; $M_{\text{personal}} = 4.70$, $SD = 1.56$ versus $M_{\text{corporate}} = 3.86$, $SD = 1.67$, and more private, $t(98) = 2.76$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{personal}} = 3.14$, $SD = 1.70$ versus $M_{\text{corporate}} = 2.32$, $SD = 1.24$. However, on the "superficial-in-depth" item, no difference was found. Overall, these 10 personal disclosure posts and 10 corporate disclosure posts were evaluated as intended and thus are appropriate for the main study.

Participants and Procedure

For the main study, a 2 (CEO gender: male vs. female) $\times$ 4 (level of disclosure: 100% corporate vs. 70% corporate and 30% personal vs. 30% corporate and 70% personal vs. 100% personal) between-subject experimental design was conducted on Qualtrics. Upon agreement to participate, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the eight conditions using the randomized option provided by Qualtrics. To control for participants' prior attitudes and interactions with a real company and CEO, we created the fictitious "Meta Connect Corporation" and a male and female CEO of this company: James Murphy as the name of the male CEO and Janice Murphy as the female CEO. To eliminate potential attractiveness bias, the male and the female CEO's profile pictures were pixelized, and only the gender of the CEO was recognizable. Other indicators such as number of comments, shares, and likes also were pixelized to minimize possible confounders. We asked participants to recall the CEO's gender at the end of the survey and deleted cases that identified the incorrect gender.

The four disclosure conditions are as follows: For all *corporate disclosure* condition, all 10 posts were concerned with corporate news, events and activities, and updates (e.g., "Looking forward to #ThinkLive2017 and spending the next two days with our manufacturer partners"). For all *personal disclosure* condition, all 10 posts were concerned with personal life, opinions, and updates (e.g., "Such a beautiful movie @isleofdogsmovie—loved it, Wes Anderson!! May even watch it again :-))." We also created two conditions in between, one of which had seven posts related to corporate disclosure and three related to personal disclosure, while the other condition had seven posts related to personal disclosure and three related to corporate disclosure. (see Supplemental Appendices for all eight conditions).

Participants were recruited using a Qualtrics research panel and were paid three dollars as compensation. To ensure participants were familiar with the Twitter platform, only those who have a Twitter account were recruited. A total of 465 U.S. adults were included for the analysis after data cleaning. Among the 465 participants, 43.2% were male and 56.8% were female. Age ranged from 18 to 85 years (M = 44.56, SD = 14.83). A majority of participants (53.3%) reported using Twitter at least 2–3 times a week. Regarding whether they follow any CEOs on Twitter, 69.2% of participants indicated no, 20.1% said yes, and 11.4% answered maybe. Table 1 summarizes the characteristic profile of our sample.

Measure

The study used 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to measure the key dependent variables. Likability of the CEO was measured with three items asking if the CEO is "friendly," "attractive," and "likable" (Lee et al., 2018; α = .86, M = 4.95, SD = 1.16). Competence of the CEO was measured with three items asking if the CEO is "competent," "intelligent," and "has leadership abilities" (Lee et al., 2018; α = .93, M = 5.26, SD = 1.29). PRI was evaluated using three items adopted from De Wulf et al. (2001; for example, This CEO makes various efforts to improve ties with regular stakeholders; α = .95, M = 4.89, SD = 1.25). Engagement intention captured publics' intention to engage with both the CEO and the company. Seven items were created for this study based on previous research and demonstrated good reliability (α = .96, M = 3.80, SD =1.81). Through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), the seven-item engagement measure yielded a single dimension. All items were loaded on a single factor with eigenvalue greater than 1 and explained 81.73% variance. Table 2 presents the mean, standard deviation, and

Table 1. Characteristics of Sample (N = 465).

Demographics	*N*	%
Age, *M* (*SD*)	44.56 (14.83)	
Gender		
Female	264	56.8
Male	201	43.2
Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	308	66.2
Latino/Hispanic	76	16.3
Black/African American	53	11.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	19	4.1
Native American/American Indian	2	0.4
Other	7	1.5
Political affiliation		
Moderate	163	35.1
Liberal	150	32.3
Conservative	120	25.8
Other	32	6.9
Education		
Less than high school	2	0.4
High school graduate	87	18.7
Some college	121	26.0
2-year degree	62	13.3
Professional degree	7	1.5
Bachelor's degree	121	26.0
Master's degree	54	11.6
Doctoral degree	11	2.4
Twitter usage		
Frequency of using Twitter		
Less than once a month	61	13.1
Once a month	46	9.9
2–3 times a month	62	13.3
Once a week	48	10.3
2–3 times a week	89	19.1
Once a day	66	14.2
Multiple times a day	93	20.0
CEO Twitter follower status		
No	322	69.2
Yes	91	19.6
Maybe	52	11.2

Note. CEO = chief executive officer.

reliability of key constructs. The means and standard deviations of the outcome variables for all eight conditions can be found in Table 3.

Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Reliability of Key Constructs.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	α
Likability: The CEO is . . .	4.95	1.16	.86
Friendly	5.20	1.32	
Attractive	4.54	1.33	
Likable	5.13	1.31	
Competence: The CEO is . . .	5.26	1.29	.93
Competent	5.24	1.38	
Intelligent	5.31	1.36	
Has leadership abilities	5.23	1.39	
Perceived Relationship Investment	4.89	1.25	.95
This CEO makes efforts to increase stakeholder's loyalty.	4.84	1.36	
This CEO makes various efforts to improve ties with regular stakeholders.	4.95	1.35	
This CEO really cares about keeping regular stakeholders.	4.91	1.41	
This company makes efforts to increase stakeholder's loyalty.	4.87	1.39	
This company makes various efforts to improve its tie with regular stakeholders.	4.88	1.40	
This company really cares about keeping regular stakeholders.	4.89	1.44	
Engagement	3.80	1.81	.96
How likely are you going to follow the CEO on Twitter?	3.71	2.05	
How likely are you going to follow the CEO's company on Twitter?	3.76	2.00	
How likely are you going to search for more information about the CEO (e.g., going to the CEO's official webpage or other social media accounts)?	3.93	2.00	
How likely are you going to search for more information about the company (e.g., going to the company's official webpage or other social media accounts)?	4.00	1.97	
How likely will you like this CEO's post?	4.01	1.98	
How likely will you share this CEO's post?	3.60	2.04	
How likely will you comment on the CEO's post?	3.60	1.97	

Note. CEO = chief executive officer.

Results

To test H1, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with levels of disclosure and CEO gender as independent variables and perceived CEO likability as the dependent variable. The results revealed that the expected interaction was not statistically significant, $F(3, 457) = .89$, $p = .45$, $\eta_p^2 = .006$. In other words, personal

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Outcome Variables Across Eight Experimental Conditions.

	CEO likability		CEO competence		Perceived relationship investment		Public engagement intention		
Condition	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*N*
C1 (F)	5.03	1.17	5.41	1.31	5.30	1.08	3.61	1.88	62
C2 (F)	4.95	1.30	5.45	1.28	5.06	1.23	3.91	1.90	55
C3 (F)	4.99	1.06	5.07	1.24	4.60	1.15	3.66	1.73	58
C4 (F)	4.74	1.13	4.94	1.30	4.18	1.33	3.42	1.64	59
C5 (M)	4.87	1.07	5.41	1.08	5.34	0.97	3.94	1.81	57
C6 (M)	5.10	1.13	5.47	1.19	5.11	1.13	4.02	1.88	58
C7 (M)	4.91	1.36	5.11	1.31	4.58	1.39	3.75	1.86	59
C8 (M)	5.01	1.08	5.21	1.49	4.91	1.26	4.06	1.75	61

Note. All constructs were measured using a 7-point scale. CEO = chief executive officer; C1 = female CEO, 100% corporate disclosure; C2 = female CEO, 70% corporate disclosure; C3 = female CEO, 30% corporate disclosure; C4 = female CEO, 0% corporate disclosure; C5 = male CEO, 100% corporate disclosure; C6 = male CEO, 70% corporate disclosure; C7 = male CEO, 30% corporate disclosure; C8 = male CEO, 0% corporate disclosure.

disclosure did not have more pronounced benefits for a male than for a female CEO in terms of likability. Neither was there a main effect for levels of disclosure on perceived likability, $F(3, 457) = .31, p = .82, \eta_p^2 = .002$, indicating that perceived likability did not vary based on types of disclosure. Thus, H1 was not supported. We also tested the main effect for gender of CEO on perceived likability but found no difference, $F(1, 457) = .16, p = .69, \eta_p^2 = .000$.

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to test whether perceived competence for a female CEO differed based on her different levels of personal disclosure (RQ1). To conduct this analysis, we selected cases on the female CEO ($N = 230$), treated levels of disclosure as the independent variable and perceived competence as the dependent variable. The results revealed that levels of personal disclosure did not have an impact on how publics evaluate the female CEO's competence, $F(3, 226) = 2.17, p = .09$.

The same process was used to test H2. A one-way ANOVA test showed that there was no relationship between a male CEO's levels of personal disclosure and publics' evaluation of his competence, $F(3, 231) = 1.04, p = .38$. Thus, H2 was rejected.

It is likely that frequency of Twitter use and CEO Twitter follow status may affect participants' evaluation of the CEO's social media investment and their intention to engage with the CEO. For instance, participants who are followers of real CEOs and who are more active on Twitter may show different levels of engagement intention. Therefore, we controlled these two factors when examining PRI and public engagement intention. We conducted a two-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to answer RQ 2, RQ3, and RQ4 wherein levels of disclosure and CEO gender were treated as

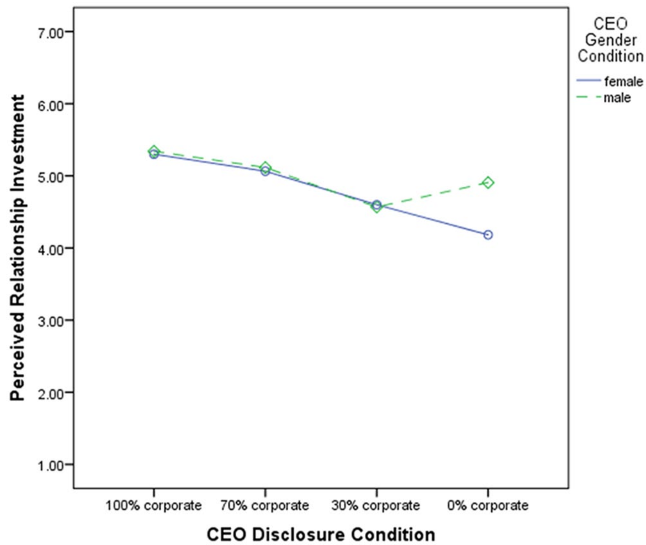

Figure 1. The effect of CEO gender and disclosure on PRI.
Note. PRI = perceived relationship investment.
PRI is measured on a 1(*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) Likert-type scale.

independent variables and PRI as the dependent variable. Results showed that the interaction between different levels of disclosure and CEO gender only approached statistical significance, $F(3, 455) = 2.40$, $p = .067$, $\eta_p^2 = .016$ (RQ4). Figure 1 shows that when the female CEO's posts are 100% about personal disclosure, her PRI was devalued, whereas the male CEO was viewed more favorably in this situation.

However, the main effect for levels of disclosure on PRI was significant, $F(3, 455) = 9.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .061$ such that more corporate (less personal) disclosure generated greater PRI (RQ2). The follow-up pairwise comparisons revealed that 100% corporate disclosure induced higher PRI than 30% (mean difference = .693, $p < .001$) and 0% (mean difference = .717, $p < .001$) corporate disclosure. Moreover, 70% corporate disclosure engendered higher PRI than 30% (mean difference = .451, $p < .01$) and 0% (mean difference = .475, $p < .01$) corporate disclosure. No difference was found between 100% and 70% corporate disclosure conditions (mean difference = .242, $p = .123$).

In addition, the main effect for CEO gender on PRI was significant, $F(1, 455) = 4.03$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .009$ (RQ3). Specifically, the male CEO was perceived as investing more in relationship management than the female CEO (mean difference = .223).

RQ 5, RQ6, and RQ7 asked the effects of disclosure type, gender, and the interaction of both on public engagement intention. A two-way ANCOVA was conducted with disclosure type and CEO gender as independent variables and engagement intention as the dependent variable while controlling for participants' frequency of Twitter use and CEO Twitter follow status. The results revealed that there was no significant interaction between CEO gender and disclosure type on public engagement intention, F (3, 455) = .49, p = .69, η_p^2 =.003 (RQ7). The main effect for disclosure type was not significant, F(3, 455) = .18, p = .91, η_p^2 =.001 (RQ5). However, the main effect for CEO gender on public engagement intention was significant, F(1, 455) = 4.57, $p < .05$, η_p^2 =.010, such that the male CEO elicited stronger public engagement intention than the female CEO (mean difference = .355, $p < .05$) (RQ6).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, high levels of personal disclosure did not enhance CEO likability, competence, or benefit public relations outcomes such as PRI or engagement intention. On the contrary, publics' attribution of high relationship investment mainly resulted from reading professional, corporate-related posts. CEO gender did not appear to be a moderating factor in affecting CEO likeability or competence. However, we did find a small but significant main effect for gender on both public engagement intention and PRI such that the male CEO appeared to garner more engagement intention and PRI than the female CEO. Finally, there was no interaction effect found between gender and levels of CEO personal disclosure on any public relations outcomes. The following discussion centers on interpreting these findings and illustrating implications for theory and practice.

On Perceived Likability and Competence

Posts that featured high personal disclosure, to our surprise, did not increase the perceived likability or competence of the CEO. This finding contradicts self-disclosure literature developed in the interpersonal communication context positing that high self-disclosure should increase perceived intimacy, bonding, and liking of the communicator (Collins & Miller, 1994).

Two perspectives in the current literature may shed light on our findings. First, we suspect that the value of self-disclosure manifested in interpersonal, face-to-face interactions may not be directly or easily transferred to the computer-mediated context. Notably, self-disclosure has its theoretical root in social penetration theory, which is grounded in face-to-face interpersonal communication and relationship development, where undivided attention and customized information is feasible and attainable, and the perceived specialness of relationship among communicators is salient. By contrast, CEOs' social media communication is inherently one-to-*N* communication wherein messages are disseminated to a mass audience online (e.g., peers, employees, customers, investors, etc.) rather than tailored for a person or a specific group. Thus, despite featuring personal lives and opinions, high personal disclosure from a prominent figure who presumably has thousands of followers may not be seen as intimate in nature. Bazarova (2012) agreed that online disclosures such as public information exchanges on social platforms "come with a price of reduced intimacy interpretation for a receiver" (p. 829).

Our second interpretation involves questioning whether the nature of our experimental design (i.e., reading 10 tweets) can adequately induce people's attitude formation. According to expectancy-value approach, attitude involves both cognition (i.e., what you expect of a certain object) and affect (i.e., how you feel about the expectation; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Given that perceived likability and competency involve the formation of evaluations of these beliefs, publics may need longer or more frequent interactions with the evaluated objects (i.e., CEOs) to form an attitude, which could not be fulfilled by simply showing them a fictitious CEO and his or her tweets. In this study, disclosure only makes a difference in affecting people's cognition; more specifically, people's beliefs in how much the CEO has invested in building the relationship with the publics. Besides, Altman and Taylor (1973) suggested the stages of relationship may influence how people view personal revelation such that high personal disclosure may decrease liking when it happens at the earliest stage of a relationship. It is possible that as participants had their first encounter with the fictitious CEO, they may have experienced what Altman and Taylor described as discomfort.

Despite the widely held "catch 22" phenomenon for women leaders, we did not find gender as an influential factor in affecting ratings of CEO likability or competence. In other words, we failed to show that a male CEO would receive higher likability than a female CEO when both enact personal disclosure on Twitter. Not only was there no interaction, no main effect was found on likability. However, regarding perceived competence, we are hesitant to conclude that female CEOs are not penalized for posting about their personal lives even though ratings on perceived competence on the female CEO are the same between the personal and corporate disclosure conditions. This is partly because the effect of disclosure type on perceived competence for the female CEO approached statistical significance in two conditions: In conditions in which the female CEO posts contained all (100%) or primarily (70%) corporate-related content, she was rated higher in competence compared with when posts contained 100% personal content. For the male CEO, disclosure type does not influence how publics evaluated his competence.

On PRI and Engagement Intention

In light of the debate over choosing between more personal, casual versus more professional, corporate-related posts, our findings point to professional, corporate disclosure as a more effective means to gain high levels of PRI. PRI has caught increasing attention from public relations scholars. The finding that publics perceive high relationship investment efforts when CEOs primarily post professional-related information (as opposed to personal disclosure) on Twitter is significant in that it illustrates CEOs are better off being professional when going social. Regarding the gender factor, it is noteworthy that gender has a main effect on PRI, indicating that holding disclosure type constant, the male CEO was perceived as investing more into relationship management compared with the female CEO.

We also try to make sense of the findings around public engagement intention. Even though we did not find any differential effects of types of disclosure on public engagement intention, we suspect that it is because of the nature of the experimental design, as the CEO and the company were fictional, and 10 posts may be inadequate information for publics to profile the CEO and the company to make engagement decisions. However, studies utilizing survey and content analysis suggest that executives are better off posting professional content for engagement purpose. Alghawi et al. (2014) found in their survey that Chinese microblog users indicate a preference to engage with CEOs who post highly professional content over CEOs who adopt a friend image strategy. Interestingly, after analyzing 1,068 posts from 34 Fortune 1000 CEOs on Twitter, Huang and Yeo (2018) identified that posts related to updating status of personal life lead to fewer retweets whereas CEOs who serve as corporate spokespersons and demonstrate thought leadership are favored. Finally, CEO gender appears to influence the extent to which publics intend to engage, with higher engagement ratings for male CEOs. Given that the bulk of literature has only identified gender bias in people when they evaluate individual attributes such as likability and competence, our finding is heuristic in that it points out that publics may hold implicit gender bias when casting cognitive (i.e., PRI) and behavioral evaluation (i.e., engagement intention). Nevertheless, we are cautious in over-interpreting this result because of the small effect size overall. Whether this result holds and why it occurs needs to be addressed in future research.

Implications for Theory and Practice

By studying the causal relationships between disclosure type, gender, and key public relations outcomes, this study contributes to our theoretical understanding of leadership social media communication and suggests that what to communicate (disclosure strategies) and who does the communicating (communicator gender) matter, to various degrees, for executives and organizations in the social media era. To the authors' knowledge, this study is among the first to use an experimental design to examine the relationship between executive social media communication and key public relations outcomes. In this sense, we diversify the approach to examining executive social media communication beyond survey and content analysis. Furthermore, this study extends the application of the PRI concept to the leadership communication arena and demonstrates that, by capitalizing on social media, organizational leaders can directly contribute to relationship building beyond organizational-level public relations and human resources maneuvers. In addition, the current study not only examined person-level outcomes such as likability and competence but also linked leadership social media communication with organizational effectiveness by examining PRI and public engagement.

The current study also takes into account gender biases toward high-achieving women leaders in business and politics. Even though gender research in the context of leadership and management has been ongoing for more than five decades (Joshi et al., 2015), communication scholars have not sufficiently examined how leaders' gender impacts perceived communication effectiveness and its public relations implications.

Previous research reported positive associations between strategic leadership communication in its various forms and beneficial outcomes, including organizational identification, organizational emotional culture, employee-organization relationships, and employee extra-role behaviors (Men & Yue, 2019; Yue et al., 2020). However, it remains unclear concerning the effectiveness of messages when delivered by leaders of different genders and types of communication outcomes likely influenced by communicator gender. Answers to these questions are valuable for organizational executives, communication and public relations professionals, given that there has been a record increase in the number of women assuming CEO positions and the essential role of public relations in providing strategic counsel to top leadership (Pew Research Center, 2015).

We advocate Fountaine's (2017) call to further incorporate gender into public relations discussion to enrich the discipline both in theory and practice. Specifically, we encourage scholars in the intersection of leadership communication, relationship management, and social media research to position gender at the center of the stage instead of approaching gender simply as a control variable. Although it is laudable that public relations scholars have been dedicated in examining the gender gap in public relations profession (e.g., Sha & Toth, 2005), research remains lacking in terms of how public relations could aid organizational leaders to tackle gender-related biases both internally when they interact with employees and externally with other key stakeholders. In summary, this study is heuristic in suggesting a closer theoretical link between gender, leadership, and strategic communication management research.

The findings have practical implications for CEOs, senior executives, and public relations professionals. First, CEOs should recognize the value they can potentially create serving as "Chief Relationship Officer." As seen from this study, publics prefer professional, corporate-related posts from the CEO. This finding has corroborated prior studies, suggesting that CEOs should be "spontaneous yet not too informal" (Weber Shandwick, 2013, p. 22). The finding is also encouraging because CEOs and other senior executives who are concerned with privacy issues related to sharing personal lives and opinions on social media can now more confidently post about their companies—for example, corporate activities and events, products and services, company vision and mission, partnership, and thought leadership—to build up perceptions of relationship investment. Given that CEOs are considered as the representation of their organizations and are anticipated to engage in open dialogues and interactions with publics, public relations and communication teams must aid CEOs in identifying opportunities and avoiding risks in social media communication. We believe that much can be done to turn CEOs into social media influencers who can effectively engage and build relationships with digital publics.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that provide a springboard for future research. First, this study did not measure perceived appropriateness of personal disclosure from message recipients' perspective, which might be a boundary condition for high personal disclosure to be effective. Future research should examine variation in preferences for self-disclosure among those who perceive self-disclosure as generally appropriate. Second, we did not find participants' gender to be a significant moderator. Future research should consider measuring participants' *gender stereotype* which could be a more relevant moderator in the process of evaluating disclosure from different genders. Third, our stimuli featured fictitious CEOs, about whom participants had no prior knowledge. Although we were able to establish a more rigorous test of causation with this experiment, a survey that asks respondents to reflect on a real-life CEO with whom they have preexisting attitudes may be a better way to observe respondents' affective and behavioral responses toward the CEO and the organization. In addition, other outcome variables central to leadership evaluation should be investigated, such as leadership effectiveness, leader credibility, and authenticity, for which gender differences may appear.

It should also be noted that people have different motivations to follow CEOs. It is important for future research to investigate what each of the stakeholder group expects to see from CEOs' personal social media accounts. Incorporating different audiences' motivations (or alternatively, focusing on one specific stakeholder group) would provide more in-depth information on why they follow CEOs, what content they hope to learn from CEOs, and how CEOs can provide more tailored messages. We believe surveys and interviews are appropriate methods to probe these questions. Last but not least, we suggest future research conduct longitudinal experiments to examine the effect of disclosure over time. The fictitious CEO could "post" messages based on a predetermined timeline. After a few weeks' periodic exposure, participants can be invited to answer questions related to CEO attributes, PRI, and relationship quality. Doing so will increase external validity.

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Supplemental Material

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Tom Kelleher, PhD, is professor and associate dean for graduate studies and research in the College of Journalism and Communications at the University of Florida. Kelleher joined the UF faculty in 2014 and served as chair of the Department of Advertising for 5 years before being appointed associate dean in 2019. He served as a member of the faculty at the University of Hawaii for 12 years and as chair of the School of Communications there from 2010 to 2013. He also served on the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from 2004 to 2006.

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