PROACTIVE SELF-DISCLOSURE OF THREATS: THE EFFECTS OF VOLUNTARY DISCLOSURE OF CORPORATE ISSUES ON PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSPARENCY, CREDIBILITY, AND PERCEIVED SEVERITY OF ISSUES

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by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Suill Kim and Bosook Joo and to my brother, Jeemyeong Kim. Without your love and financial/spiritual/mental support, I would never have completed this journey. This degree is just as much yours as it is mine. I love you! Most important thanks also go to my husband, Sungwook Kim, who has been my best friend, spiritual partner and my number one supporter. None of this would have ever been possible if I didn’t have him by my side. It is so wonderful to have you beside me, in the past, present, and future. Thank you God for all of the good and precious gifts you've given me; especially the gift of the love of my life, my husband.

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ABSTRACT

Guided by the public relations literature of stealing thunder and organizational transparency, this study examined the effects of corporations' self-disclosure claims of their issues via Facebook on audience perceptions. The study used a 3 (information disclosure: voluntary vs. responsive vs. obligatory disclosure) x 2 (referral source: presence vs. absence) mixed-subject design experiment with 142 adult participants (mean age = 35.4). The results showed that regardless of one's prior involvement toward a stimuli brand, the voluntary disclosure of a corporate issue led the participants to perceive that company as more transparent and more credible than either the "responsive" disclosure messages or the "obligatory" disclosure. Notwithstanding, the voluntary, self-disclosure condition, when compared to the obligatory condition, was more effective in reducing participants' perceived severity of the particular issue.

The results theoretically extend the stealing-thunder literature, in a way that public might view a company's disclosure as either volunteered or forced to respond, given that the responsive and the mandatory disclosure of information were essentially the same in responses. The findings also suggest that an organization may strategically use the voluntary information disclosure with their social media platforms, if the strategy can enhance greater transparency and credibility perceptions toward the organization using that strategy and further, mitigate the severity perceptions toward the threats.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Public relations scholarship is rich with studies on crisis management, which refers to preparation and activities to lessen physical, financial, and reputational damage to an organization posed by a crisis (Coombs, 2010). It follows that scholars defined a crisis as either an event or something that happens (Coombs, 1999, 2007, 2009; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Lerbinger, 1997; Mitroff, 2005; Regester& Larkin, 1997) or as an ongoing process (Darling,Hannu, &Raimo, 1996; Jaques, 2010a, 2010b;Roux-Dufort, 2007; Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). The clarification of the concept of crisis is fundamental and crucial in that “how we define crisis determines whether we see its interconnection with issues, brand equity, and risk” (Heath, 2010, p. 5).

Followed by the process approach of defining a crisis conceptually, public relations issues can be viewed as potential threats to a focal organization, especially when any stakeholders define and raise the issue of legitimacy and accountability of the organization. Grounded on the conceptual definition of issues in the preceding phase of a crisis (Elliott et al., 2000; Jaques, 2010a, 2010b; Roux-Dufort, 2000; Smith, 2005), the present paper explicates organizational issues as those that include any given ongoing risks associated with the business sector, such as organizational mishaps or accidents.

Regarding the span of issues management as the prevention phase of managerial failure (Gonzales-Herrero & Pratt, 1996; Jaques, 2010a, 2010b), proactively addressing corporate issues may allow an organization to mitigate its reputational damage inflicted by the backfire of such issues. As one potential way to properly deal with a particular issue, a highly proactive crisis communication approach called “stealing thunder” (i.e., “an admission of a weakness, a mistake or failure before that weakness is announced by another party, such as an interest group or the media,” Arpan & Pompper, 2003, p. 294) has been regarded as an effective strategy leading to more favorable public perceptions toward corporations (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011).

The self-disclosure strategy employed by an organization may result in journalists and publics attributing higher credibility toward the organization, compared to when learning the information first from another party (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & RoskosEwoldsen, 2005). In doing so, however, previous study merely used a news article as the platform carrying that strategy by differentiating the stated source revealing the crisis first. Beyond the bi-polar approach comparing the stealing thunder condition (i.e., an organization’s official reveals a crisis first) with the thunder condition (i.e., a journalist/outside public reveals a crisis first), further elaboration of the self-disclosure used by an organization is needed (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Whittington & Yakis-Douglas, 2010).

It follows that concerning the issue phase as the preceding phase of a crisis, a corporate issue may not be revealed by a news article; thus, the stealing-thunder is likely to be used within the corporation-structured message first. In other words, while traditional stealing thunder studies focus on a party who first reveals the story, the present paper argues for different types of disclosure available in the organization-structured message: it can be either voluntarily opened, be responsive to media raising issues or concerns (i.e. a journalist), or may the response be perceived as an obligatory disclosure if an issue is required to be revealed by a government agency.

Furthermore, when it comes to considering the new media environment in which people instantly share content, opinions, experiences, and perspectives, it is important to understand the how the information source responsible forparticipants learning about a particular issue affects public perceptions (Arpan&Rokskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). Not only has the public become more literate on the use of public relations tactics by organizations, but the public's literacy on social media platforms has also increased. This line of research is important to public relations because the public is quickly exposed to others' facts, values, and opinions on these platforms (Heath, 2010, 2011). Thus, there is room to further explore the effects of the presence of a referral source exposing corporate disclosures on audience perceptions, which in turn may connect to whether disclosure is primed as reactive or proactive.

As an attempt to explain potential outcomes associated with proactive self-disclosure, the present paper reviews the dense literature of trust and transparency in journalism and organizational psychology (Allen, 2008;Butler, 1991; Craft & Heim, 2009; Farris, Senner, & Butterfield, 1973; Gabarro, 1978; Good, 1988; Hart, Capps, Cangemi, &Caillouet. 1986; Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Jahansoozi, 2006; Mayer, Davis, &Schoorman, 1995; McAllister, 1995; Plaisance,2007; Rawlins, 2009). To this end,this study explicates transparency as a perceptional outcome associated with when being exposed to a strategic, self-disclosure statement made by an organization regarding a particular issue.

It follows that increased public perceptions of an organization being transparent, as prompted by an organization's information disclosure, can lead to higher public credibility ratings toward the organization. In consideration of commodity theory (Brock, 1968; Brock &Brannon, 1992), it is equally important to know whether publics regard receiving greater levels of information disclosure as an opportunity to obtain more commodities, resulting in less value attached to freely given information. Commodity theory questions whether publics' perceived severity associated with a given issue can be reduced by a relatively large amount of information disclosed by an organization. This operationalization highlights the role of proactive self-disclosure as a crucial discipline for responding to public expectations of corporations' actions (Jaques, 2010a).

The main research questions are 1) whether different levels of organizational disclosure (voluntary vs. responsive vs. obligatory) influence organizational transparency, perceived credibility of the organization, and severity of a given issue, and 2) whether the presence of a referral source behind exposure of different disclosure claims (presence vs. absence) influences participants' perceptions. To answer these questions, I conducted an online experiment with 142 adults from a Midwestern state.

Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to experimentally test the main and the interaction effects of three different levels of an organization's self-disclosure. A higher level of proactive (or voluntary) disclosure is expected to result in enhanced credibility of an organization and avoidance of negative outcomes in terms of public perceptions (i.e., severity of an issue). The results, if they support this reasoning, could warrant proactivity for both ethical and practical reasons. Theoretical and practical implications will be discussed in regards to the results.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2-1. Theoretical Background of Proactive Issues Management

Reactive Crisis Management vs. Proactive Issues Management

For decades, one of the most rapidly growing bodies of research in public relations is crisis management (Benoit, & Pang, 2008; Choi & Lin, 2009; Claeys, Cauberghe, & Vyncke, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 1996, 2007, 2009, 2011; Coombs, 1998, 2004; Jin & Cameron, 2007; Len-Ríos, &, Benoit, 2004; Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011; Sturges, 1994; Wester, 2009). For example, scholars quantitatively content analyzed public relations studies in communication literature and showed that most articles they studied are based on crisis communication and crisis management evaluation (e.g., technical error accidents, equipment failure, product recalls, natural disasters, etc.) (An & Cheng, 2010; Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010). Crisis refers to "the perception of an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact the organization's performance" (Coombs, 2009, p. 100). Related to the definition itself, crisis management studies focus on executing effective communication strategies to reduce threats posed by a crisis (Coombs, 2010a).

In doing so, scholars explicate crisis management with two distinct approaches – a crisis as an event (i.e., the crisis is an unpredictable, sudden event to an organization) (Coombs, 1999, 2007; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Lerbinger, 1997; Mitroff, 2005; Regester & Larkin, 1997) and as a process (Brown, 2002; Darling, Hannu, & Raimo, 1996; Jaques, 2010a; Roux-Dufort, 2007). Quoting communication scholars and their studies (Brown, 2002; Coombs, 1999, 2007; Darling, Hannu, & Raimo, 1996; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Lerbinger, 1997; Mitroff, 2005; Regester & Larkin, 1997; Roux-Dufort, 2007), Jaques (2010a, 2010b) describes these two opposite approaches and argues that crisis has been defined either as inevitable or as the end part of a process where everything exploded. The latter approach is grounded on two assumptions: 1) that most crises are not sudden occurrences, but follow a warning phase period, and 2) that public relations practitioners need to employ proactive activities that can be implemented to identify or prevent potential crises, or to mitigate the impact of those which occur (Jaques, 2009). In other words, crises should be identified and anticipated.

Studies concerned with the process approach seek to identify elements of crisis management and issue management as distinctive concepts that form a process within the continuum of a crisis (Heath, 2010; Jaques, 2009; Roux-Dufort, 2007). It follows that "the conceptualization of crisis management as a continuum of activity promotes analysis of the process extending back before the triggering event and deeper into the preceding phases" (Jaques, 2010a, p. 470).

In other words, the key advantage of the process approach is the understanding of trends and knowledge building about intervention by defining and focusing on emerging issues. This highlights the role of issues management as a distinctive, proactive tool that is integrated in crisis prevention (Mitroff, 2002). In spite of the fact that organizations cannot monitor everything that could potentially blossom into a crisis, as the preceding phase of a crisis, issues management helps organizations plan prevention, monitor issues, assess a threat posed by a particular issue, adjust the degree of control over the problem, and make usable organizational responses available (e.g., the “proactive symmetrical crisis management process” in Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996, p. 89).

In a similar vein, Wilcox and Cameron (2009) described the role of public relations as occurring over evolutionary conflict management life cycles. The basic assumption of this approach is that the role of public relations is to help with the success of an organization’s conflicts in terms of resolving conflict and making favorable outcomes for the organization (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010a; 2010b; Wilcox & Cameron, 2009); Cameron and colleagues explain conflict management activities as four evolutionary phases of conflict: the proactive phase, strategic phase, reactive phase, and recovery phase.

In the proactive phase, the primary task of public relations is to prevent a conflict from arising by scanning the environment and monitoring current issues related to organizations’ interests (i.e., “the daily clipping of news stories,” Wilcox & Cameron, 2009, p. 253). As a second step, the strategic phase refers to the stage when an organization can detect an emerging conflict within present issues. At this stage, public relations activities include conducting risk communication to alert publics about health problems and environmental damage, positioning a conflict in certain ways so it will become favorable to an organization, and developing a specific crisis management plan (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). When a conflict leads to a significant impact on an organization in the reactive phase, public relations professionals should develop communication strategies and tactics to resolve the conflict. When it comes to the recovery phase, the organization seeks to repair its reputation perceived by key publics by employing image restoration strategies.

In the developmental conflict life cycles, reactive and recovery phases reflect crisis management, while issues management is proactive in nature. That is, issues management refers to organizations' strategic plans and behaviors for addressing an emerging issue in an attempt to reduce potential damage (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). Similarly, Gaunt and Ollenburger (1995) highlights the value of issues management as a warning phase for mitigating or eliminating potential risk associated with a crisis. While reactive crisis management refers to the ways companies deal with crises after they become subject to public outrage (Hainsworth, 1990), issues management suggests that companies identify emerging issues (i.e. criticism and critics) and respond to them before they become public knowledge (Jones & Chase, 1979; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992).

In spite of the value of issues management within the crisis continuum, public relations research in the proactive phase has not yet been fully examined (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). Jaques (2009) also contends that relatively less attention has been given to the proactive phase of the process continuum, which offers the most promising avenues for future research; the ways in which publics respond to organizations' issues management is especially important. Specifically, one difficulty that has hindered previous research on the proactive phase has been a lack of clear differentiation between proactive and reactive issues and their outcomes. Guided by the notion that the issue phase is linked with a crisis in practice (Jaques, 2009), the following section will explicate public relations issues related to PR practice.

Explication of Public Relations Issue as Ongoing Risk

Previous studies in issues management have tended to limit their scope and boundaries in a public policy arena (Chase, 1982; Ewing, 1987; Fox, 1983; Heath & Palenchar, 2009a). For example, Fox (1983) explained that issues management should take the form of public policy planning for an organization, government relations, dealing with regulatory matters, or social responsibility problems. In the same vein, Heath and Palenchar (2009a) highlights the function of issues management as the identification, monitoring, and analysis of issues in key publics' opinions that can mature into public policy. Heath (2010) also addresses that issues management research has been heavily studied the context of health communication, community communication, or public policy. In other words, issues management has mainly been studied in public policy.

Consistent with the boundaries of issues research, early scholars identified two types of issues organizations face: internal issues originating within and external issues stemming from outside publics (Dutton & Ottensmeyer, 1987). Specifically, they argued in their article on strategic issues management systems that while internal issues come from employee dissatisfaction, they can be dealt with primarily within the organization, but external issues originate from factors outside the organization, such as publics' views. In terms of the two types of issues, external issues are more likely to be blossomed into a crisis, given that it comes from outside factors that cannot be controlled. When it comes to understanding internal issues, however, organizations may respond to such issues more effectively, in that an organization can determine what to do in terms of its business.

Beyond the traditional approach of issues management, recent public relations research demonstrates that issues can be specifically related to an organization's business, especially where outside publics' views, knowledge, and trends impact the management process of corporations and pose risks to corporations (Jaques, 2009). It follows that issues management expands its area of application to "a full range of public relations and management activities" beyond the public policy arena (Jaques, 2009, p. 282). In terms of the business-related (or management) scope of public relations issues, Jaques (2010a) describes that it ranges from environmental problems or natural disasters such as floods, fires, and infrastructure breakdowns to broader managerial causes such as managerial mistakes, scandals, executive dishonesty, takeovers and mergers, new technology, and management misconduct. It follows that all of these examples are related to a crisis, but that recently issues management includes organizations' managerial mistakes that lead to a crisis.

Based on the full range of public relations issues within the business sector, Heath (2010) points out the distinctions and interconnections between crises, risks and issues. It follows that "an issue is a contestable matter of fact, value, policy, or identification. Known risks can be contested issues – magnitude, harm, occurrence, prevention, mitigation, and such" (Heath, 2010, p. 11). In other words, issues may refer to contestable, ongoing risks, but when issues are manifested and people are harmed, a crisis occurs. Therefore, issues management includes all strategic activities, management functions, and recourses of an organization for preventing an issue from becoming public knowledge and for preventing further outrage caused by associated problems. Olaniran and Williams (2008) bolsters this approach, viewing issues as ongoing risks and the pre-crisis phase as a time when communication efforts should concentrate on locating and reducing risk. Thus, the current research defines issues management as ongoing risk associated with a wide range of public relations and management activities. Once risk, or an issue in itself, becomes news coverage and subject to public outrage, a crisis erupts. This approach connects to the early assertion regarding the function of issues management as the preceding stage for reducing potentials risk and for detecting early warning signs of a crisis (Heath & Palenchar, 2009b).

Concerning issues management as a proactive approach for predicting threats, reducing or eliminating risk, and resolving or preventing the backfire of issues (crises), research should examine issues management in the context of corporations. As noted above, the business of these organizations depends heavily on stakeholder perceptions and their evaluations of issues management (Heath, 2002; Jaques, 2010b). Thus, the present paper defines organizational issues as including any given ongoing risks associated with the business sector, such as organizational accidents or mishaps; it also suggests a foundational theme of framing issues as potential risks related to stakeholders' values or expectations related to an organization.

2-2. Application of Transparency to Proactive Disclosure

Stealing Thunder Studies in Diverse PR Domains

Scholars have suggested that being proactive and addressing a particular issue in advance of it being disclosed by others enables organizations to gain some degree of control and shape a more favorable representation to the public (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996; Heath & Palenchar, 2009a; Williams & Treadaway, 1992). In terms of issues management monitoring and solving issues that can be internal being originated from inside factors, an organization may strategically use such strategy to disclose issue first which may bolster its own position and demonstrate the organization's management efforts to solve the problem.

If an organization decides that an emerging issue is potentially damaging, the next step is to consider how to respond. Responding includes communication with all publics interested in an organization's level of responsibility attached to that issue and proactively addressing information regarding the issue to mitigate its potential risk. Guided by legal communication literatures and commodity theory (Brock, 1968; Brock & Brannon, 1992; Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1995; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993; Williams & Treadaway, 1992), researchers, in a line of studies examined the value of a highly proactive approach of information disclosure used by an organization (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011). This approach is called "stealing thunder."

According to its legal communication origins, stealing thunder is "revealing negative information about oneself before it is revealed or elicited by another person" (Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993, p. 597). A proactive stance might allow an organization to set the tone for coverage of a crisis and influence which issues will be considered in discussions of the crisis (Williams & Treadaway, 1992). Similarly, the party who employs stealing thunder may be able to frame given information in the positive side and downplay the significance of any negativity (Williams et al., 1993). Moreover, previous research yielded findings that consumers' negative perceptions of an organization can be mitigated if organizations self-disclose negative or damaging information in even the context of advertising (Easley, Bearden, & Teel, 1995).

The effectiveness of stealing thunder as a proactive self-disclosure strategy has been supported in the application of crisis communication. Arpan and Pompper (2003) initially conducted an experiment to examine the effects of stealing thunder on journalists' interest in pursuing a story, journalists' ratings of credibility toward an organization's officials, and their perceptions of the severity of a crisis. In their article, they define stealing thunder as "an admission of a weakness, a mistake or failure before that weakness is announced by another party, such as an interest group or the media" (Arpan & Pompper, 2003, p. 294). Guided by commodity theory (i.e., like commodities, the more of information there is, the less value it carries, in Brock, 1968; Brock & Brannon, 1992), Arpan and Pompper (2003) showed that journalists, as their sample, rated public relations practitioners as more credible and indicated greater interest in the story when an organization stole thunder in comparison to when the same story was revealed by another party (thunder). However, no differences were found across the two conditions (stealing thunder vs. thunder) in terms of perceptions of crisis severity or framing in reporters' news leads (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Beyond empirical evidence with reporters as study participants, Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005) conducted an experimental study with students that examined the effects of stealing thunder in a crisis situation and interactions with participants' previous involvement with the stimulus organization on their perceptions and behaviors. Findings from path analyses illustrated that when an organization stole thunder, as opposed to allowing the information to first be disclosed by another party, even the public had higher credibility perceptions toward an organization. Higher levels of supportive behavior followed—the participants showed a greater likelihood to purchase products from any of the organizations involved in the crisis when that organization stole thunder (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

Furthermore, Wigley (2011) content analyzed actual media coverage of two real-life crises (e.g., Study 1: coverage of two New York governors and the revelation of negative information about them and Study 2: coverage of two high-profile celebrity scandals) in order to compare differences in how the crises were handled by the media. In both studies, sources that stole thunder were associated with more positive frames in both headlines and articles. Their findings revealed that headlines in the stealing thunder condition relied on a progress frame with more positive toned articles as opposed to the articles in a silence condition (e.g., no comment on the scandals) with headlines using problem themes. In short, when an organization steals thunder during a crisis, the organization receives less negative news coverage from the media (Wigley, 2011).

Despite significant findings regarding the effectiveness of stealing thunder, there are some practical and theoretical gaps. First, only one study showed empirical findings regarding the impact of the proactive strategy on publics (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen , 2005), while two other studies focused more on how journalists as newsmakers perceive public relations practitioners and organizations using the strategy (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Wigley, 2011). Publics' expectations or evaluations toward the self-disclosure strategy could be as equally important to understanding the success or failure of an organization's self-disclosure of information as a practice. Less is known about the ways in which publics respond to such self-disclosure beyond credibility perceptions. Williams and colleagues also suggest adding and examining appropriate variables and assessing underlying cognitive mechanisms of the effectiveness of stealing thunder in research (Williams et al., 1993).

Second, previous studies tend to limit the potential of such a self-disclosing statement as a proactive strategy by merely focusing on the party who revealed the story first. As Arpan and Rokskos-Ewoldsen (2005) stated, participants in their experiments read a news article including the self-disclosed information, which was manipulated only by the party who revealed the story. According to the conceptualization of the issues phase as being proactive, however, a public is less likely to read or hear of any news coverage regarding an issue. Thus, further elaboration is needed regarding the venue of proactive disclosure of corporate issues in the context of public relations.

Finally, considering the new media environment, referral source exposing disclosure statements is an important variable to study. If credibility is the essential reason for the success of stealing thunder (Williams & Treadaway, 1992; Williams et al., 1993), then it should be a more effective strategy when used with an additional source cue appeared at new media such as friends or family, over the absence of an interpersonal source. Furthermore, in reality, publics might not only have learned about the crisis from journalists' news framing, but they also may have disregarded the self-disclosure (stealing thunder) if they had heard about an issue first from others. In either case, the impact of the stealing thunder would likely be mitigated. In order to examine the effectiveness of organizations' self-disclosure, instead of concentrating attention on who revealed the story first, current research should pay close attention to the referral source through which publics are actually exposed to an organization-disclosed message.

Building the theoretical framework of this research upon the issue phase as the stage to act before a problem attracts widespread media attention and public concerns, the current research seeks to investigate the research gaps in the literature review. That is, given that an organization's self-disclosure of a weakness, a mistake, or a failure could increase credibility perceptions of the organization, this paper will review important outcomes associated with the ways publics regard self-disclosure and understand a particular issue. It will also discuss whether the significance of self-disclosure can be mitigated in eyes of a public, especially when a public encounters a corporate statement through a friend's referral.

Self-disclosure and Credibility

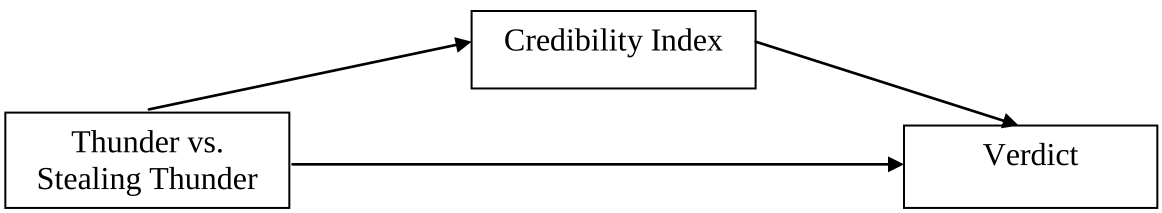
Looking at disclosure in an organization's statement, the current research defines self-disclosure as a publication made by an organization and released via corporate outlets such as a corporate website, blog, or social media page. This approach is consistent with the focus of this paper on the preceding phase of a crisis, when an organization's stealing thunder is not yet published in news articles because of its lessened knowledge and public concern about a particular issue. Moving beyond the comparison between the stealing thunder and the thunder condition operationalized only by the stated source of a news article, this study concentrates on an organizations' different levels of disclosure claims structured by an organization itself in terms of a time process. In an early, issue stage; an organization can use claims to voluntarily disclose its issue to public. As time goes by, if a few public would aware of the issue, especially when a few news media report the particular issue, the organization might use claims to correct information, while revealing more information. Likewise, if a government agency urges the organization to inform public regarding the issue, the organization still uses its own claims to respond to the government agency as well as its public.

Scholars support this argument in that corporate-structured pages play an important role in the generation and exchange of ideas that constitute a public dialogue (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). Not only do journalists refer to organization-generated information in writing news regarding emerging problems (Taylor & Perry, 2005, Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010), but organizations can also tailor and claim their side of a story with full and detailed information and respond quickly to their audience within other platforms besides the traditional news space (Heath & Palenchar, 2009b). In other words, it is important to examine an organization's self-disclosure as another original piece of information to public besides a news media. When it comes to understanding the impact of self-disclosed information on organizations' outlets, how publics react to the different levels of disclosure claims made by the organization and which claim is more effective in reducing public's a negative perception caused by a corporate issue than others should be considered. Here, accountability and legitimacy are central themes in managing issues (Roper, 2005; Spencer, 2004). Scholars describe the theoretical linkage between organizations' issues management and the value of accountability and legitimacy (Heath, 2010; Heath & Palenchar, 2009b). That is, organizations should be precise, open, and honest in scanning, monitoring, and responding to emerging issues; as indicated by its definition, one of the central themes in issues management is legitimacy, meaning doing what is necessary and accountable (Heath, 2010). All in all, an organization's self-disclosure of issue provides free information to public, while concerning public concerns and threats, which in turn, be likely to enhance its accountability and legitimacy.

Going back to issues management studies, the primary goal of issues management is to reduce legitimacy gaps between public expectations toward what an organization should do and what it actually does and to position issues in ways that are favorable to an organization by mitigating risk associated with an issue (Heath, 2002). Thus, public relations practitioners need to first attain empirical evidence on how publics process and evaluate an organization's issues management efforts in terms of legitimacy and accountability.

Conversely, previous studies solely focus on the communicator's perceived credibility as the primary outcome variable of stealing thunder. Research on persuasion suggests that if a party discloses information that appears to be against one's own interest, he or she is perceived to be more persuasive, because this action is seen as more honest and credible (Eagly, Wood, & Chaiken, 1978). In the theoretical framework of Eagly and colleagues (1978), Williams and colleagues compared a stolen thunder condition with a thunder condition (the opponent reveals first) and a control condition (no thunder; Williams et al., 1993). Specifically, they conducted an experiment (N=257) that presented a situation to participants in which a defense attorney in a criminal trial stole the thunder regarding his client's prior convictions. The findings showed that stealing thunder led to significantly greater ratings than the thunder condition on the speaker's perceived preparedness, convincingness, and trustworthiness, all of which constitute the communicator's perceived credibility. Similarly, participants in the stolen thunder condition, versus the thunder condition, were more likely to think the defendant was not guilty, while there was no difference between the stolen thunder condition and the control condition. Hence, stealing thunder can affect ratings of a presenter's credibility such that he or she is perceived to be more credible when negative information about the presenter is revealed, and this in turn can lead to more favorable judgments (Williams et al., 1993). Figure 1 illustrates the major finding regarding the impact of stealing thunder on credibility and probability of guilt scores (See Figure 1).

Figure1 Path Model of the Effects of Stealing Thunder on Credibility



Note: Adapted from Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle (1993).

Moving beyond their study concentrating on credibility perceptions, Williams and colleagues suggest adding and testing underlying variables that can influence cognitive mechanisms of the effectiveness of stealing thunder and have assessed public perceptions toward such a disclosing strategy. However, studies in stealing thunder mainly use the concept of credibility without exploring such speculations (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Rokskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

Transparency as a Fundamental Outcome of the Self-disclosure

In terms of fundamental outcomes associated with self-disclosure claims, the literature regarding stealing-thunder especially gives good insight (Dolnik, Case, &

Williams, 2003; Klonoff & Colby, 1990). While public relations studies have demonstrated that a public's higher credibility perceptions are prompted by an organization's self-disclosure, there are also inconsistent cases in which a public has become more literate in the use of strategic tactics by organizations, and thus has become more suspicious about their tactics (Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003; Klonoff & Colby, 1990). In particular, stealing thunder as a courtroom tactic may be ineffective because it makes jurors suspicious of the person using the tactic (Klonoff & Colby, 1990), or because it encourages awareness of the self-discloser's use of persuasion (Dolnik, Case, & Williams, 2003). Quoting Hearit (1994), Arpan and Pompper (2003) also address similar concerns: while using self-disclosure, public relations practitioners may accidently heighten a journalist's perceived value of the disclosed information, and even inspire the journalist to investigate beyond what the organization revealed.

This evidence posits an important concept called *transparency*, which connects to self-disclosed information, credibility of an organization using disclosure, and its accountability. The word "transparent" comes from the Latin preposition "trans," which means movement, and "parent," which means visible. Thus, transparency means, "allowing everything to be visible" (Plaisance, 2007). Journalism scholars define transparency as instrumental to the openness of information to the public. For example, Craft and Heim wrote globalization and the spread of democracy, promoted by the increasing popularity of new media, led to a world that is now more independent, forcing people to be much more transparent in explaining their actions. The instrumental nature of transparency makes it a practice carried out through disclosure of newsgathering methods to increase the reliability of news, which in turn resolves suspicion (Allen, 2008).

In general, scholars explicate the conceptual linkage between transparency and accountability, which are interconnected (Allen, 2008; Craft & Heim, 2009). For instance, a journalist's transparency is one way to earn public trust among investors, consumers, and regulators because it enhances the accountability of information: as "greater accountability may be achieved, greater credibility may be enhanced" (Craft & Heim, 2009, p. 222). Specifically, journalists disclosing newsgathering processes or inviting readers to news meetings can trigger a public's evaluation of transparency. This activity leads to such an evaluation because it increases accountability, referred to as explanations for why transparency efforts were reasonable and acceptable.

Despite the fact that transparency in the instrumental approach refers to open communication or offering substantial information to its audience, public relations and journalism scholars highlight the distinction between transparency and credibility in their capabilities of offering open communication (Allen, 2008; Burkart, 2007; Craft & Heim, 2009; Jahansoozi, 2006; Plaisance, 2007). While transparent communication or transparent behavior is the best way to build public trust, it does not equal to either trust or truth itself (Allen, 2008). This argument is crucial in that transparency, defined by open communication in the instrumental sense, is one way of establishing credibility of an organization and enhancing legitimacy of a party pursuing transparency; transparency is the initial goal of the disclosure. Here, the value of perceived transparency as a potential outcome of organizational disclosure connects to corporate credibility perceptions, but it is not the same as public trust in the particular company.

Elaboration of Cognitive-based Trust

In order to fully account for the concept of transparency as a potential outcome of organizations' self-disclosure, clarification is needed on the difference between the instrumental form of transparency (openness) and credibility (public trust in a given organization). Extensive trust literature provides powerful theoretical underpinnings regarding the distinction and interconnection between the two concepts. In general, studies have defined one's trust as based in cognitive and affective processes (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982; Lewis & Weigert, 1985; McAllister, 1995). McAllister (1995) defines interpersonal trust as "the extent to which a person is confident in and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another" (p. 25). McAllister's study and definition of interpersonal trust illustrate the distinction between cognition-based and affect-based trust. While affect-based trust is grounded in an individual's perception of others' behavioral motives and ongoing social interactions with others (e.g., faith in a party having relationship and interaction frequency), cognitive-based trust is established in a basis on provided information (i.e., information about how a trustee behaved in the past and available background information about the trustee). Lewis and Wiegert (1985) also assert that individuals choose which entities they trust using cognition and based upon evidence showing that someone or something can be trusted.

In terms of affect-based trust, previous studies show a meaningful consideration of how people form trust or credibility toward others. That is, affect-based trust or emotional trustworthiness is grounded in an individual's attributions concerning the motives for others' behavior, assuming a frequent interaction between a trustor and a trustee (Johnson-George & Swap, 1982). In other words, affect-based trust is characterized by a greater investment of time, emotion, and energy for forming such trust (McAllister, 1995). As McAllister (1995) asserted, cognitive-based trust is a necessary condition for affect-based trust to develop and for people to invest further in a relationship.

The distinction between affective-based and cognitive-based trust becomes clear in the linkage of the concepts to transparency. Specifically, Plaisance (2007) defines the concept of transparency as “openness in communication” that “serves a reasonable expectation of forthright exchange when parties have a legitimate stake in the possible outcomes or effects of the sending or receiving of the message” (p. 188). In doing so, Plaisance regards transparency as merely one notion of truth-telling and points out that an openness of information could fail to reduce deception and ensure public trust. The concept, that Plaisance (2007) noted, is more related to the concept of affect-based trust that poses ongoing communication and mutual respect, which is an unrealistic condition for an issue phase.

Consequently, transparency, explicated as open communication and characterized by an offering of more explanation, may be a necessary condition for earning one’s credibility, given that it offers resources for developing cognitive-based trust. Considering the impact of self-disclosure of public relations issues before they become public knowledge (Jones & Chase, 1979; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992), cognitive-based trust is more likely to be activated. It follows that information disclosed by an entity pursuing transparency can be the cognitive content behind a person’s credibility perceptions.

In a similar vein, Mayer and colleagues presented a definition of trust and the "Proposed Model of Trust" with factors of perceived credibility: ability (i.e., skills or competences), benevolence (i.e., "the perception of a positive orientation of the trustee toward the trustor," Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 719), and integrity ("the consistency of the party's past actions, credible communications about the trustee from other parties, belief that the trustee has a strong sense of justice, and the extent to which the party's actions are congruent with his or her words, " Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995, p. 719). In the model, available information from the trustee serves as an important factor for modifying the trustee's estimated ability, benevolence, and integrity, resulting in increased credibility perceptions of the trustor. Related to these definitions, both transparency and credibility could be perceived and assessed using cognitive reasoning and given information. Furthermore, scholars often suggest that a trustee's openness is an important antecedent of his or her trustworthiness (Butler, 1991; Farris, Senner, & Butterfield, 1973; Gabarro, 1978; Hart, Capps, Cangemi, & Caillouet, 1986).

Regarding this research, the concept of transparency is a functional means to establish one's credibility, according to its original definition in journalism, which is engaging in disclosure, openness, or behavior to pursue open communication. Thus, transparency posed by information disclosure can be an antecedent of credibility perceptions of a party offering such disclosure, especially before publics decide if they will invest in searching for information about an organization.

2-3. Proactive Disclosure as Strategic Openness

Proactive Disclosure, Credibility and Transparency

Public relations studies have not fully accounted for whether transparency refers to transparent communication rooted in respectful exchange and relationships or if it refers to strategic behavior. Some public relations studies emphasize transparent communication as genuinely rooted in respectful exchange and ongoing interactions for maintaining organization-public relationships (Grunig & Huang, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000); specifically, they argue that transparency is ultimately valuable for what it says about the treatment of stakeholders. In Kantian terms, transparency is how we show the respect owed to all others involved in a communicative act (Jahansoozi, 2006). Thus, transparency and trustworthiness in an organization are important for building a relationship with a community by providing mutual support, collaboration, and cooperation between the community and an organization.

On the other hand, transparency in public relations refers to open communication that is more likely to be strategic (Kim, Hong, & Cameron, 2011; Rawlins, 2009; Sweetser, 2010). As a tool or strategy to be used to achieve some organizational goal, disclosure is important for protecting or enhancing organizational image. Disclosure highlights the instrumental definition of transparency, stating that public trust in organizations could be maintained by practices to increase the visibility of an organization’s actions. For example, Sweetser (2010) focused on the lack of information disclosure, operationalized as hiding the truth during an organization’s campaign, and conducted an experiment to investigate the effects of disclosure (i.e., the participants watched a viral video with the purpose of promotion, disclosing that the company created the video) or nondisclosure (i.e., the participants watched the viral video, but the company denied it produced the viral video) on a public's perceptions of a given organization. The findings showed that the disclosure condition, as opposed to the lack of disclosure/nondisclosure condition, led to enhanced corporate credibility perceptions (Sweetser, 2010).

Similarly, Rawlins (2009) posited that transparency is an effort to make as much information available, aiming to help publics reason and to make organizations' images favorable and actions accountable. Guided by previous scholarly work on transparency, the current study focuses on transparent communication as an organization's strategic behavior of opening information to the public to eventually enhance their credibility. Journalism studies and the concept of cognitive-based trust inform these two assumptions: 1) for an emerging issue, information first disclosed by an organization serves as a potential means to increase transparency; and 2) the full disclosure of information from an organization can enhance its credibility. This instrumental approach can help public relations scholars understand the ways in which publics react to content with various levels of disclosure, especially in times of ongoing risk.

For now, this study describes organizational transparency as an antecedent of a public's credibility perceptions toward an organization. Based on the theoretical framework of cognitive-based trust (Lewis & Wiegert; 1985, McAllister, 1995), this study proposes that an organization's proactive information disclosure may enhance audience perceptions of organizational transparency, which in turn signify the audience perceptions of greater organizational credibility.

Impact of Different Levels of Proactive Disclosure

Grounded in the conceptual linkage between an organization-disclosed message, its transparency posed by disclosure, and ultimately, credibility perceptions formed toward an organization, this paper seeks to operationalize the different levels of proactive disclosure available in a disclosure message. This would involve identifying different levels according to the ways self-disclosure can be delivered to publics. These include voluntary, responsive, and obligatory self-disclosure.

As noted earlier, studies in stealing thunder have operationalized self-disclosure conditions by merely using parties that first revealed given stories (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos Ewoldsen, 2005). Beyond the comparison of self-disclosure and non-disclosure (others disclose first), the dissimilar nature of disclosure claims exists in an issue phase. That is, an issue phase indicates the time in which a few people are aware of a particular issue and the risk associated with it. Additionally, the organization's disclosure as its transparent communication effort focuses more on information-giving to publics and reducing risk. The significance of examining stealing-thunder as opposed to thunder becomes minimal, as an issue and risk follow a process continuum (Jaques, 2007; 2009; 2010a, 2010b). A prospective case illustrates this point.

Suppose that a few people are aware of an issue in which a company's management misconduct might cause problems in its factory cleanup system, and one person claims he lost his daughter who worked at the factory. From the stealing thunder perspective, research would compare a condition in which the company's misconduct is first disclosed by the company to a disclosure from journalists condition or to another activist group's disclosure condition. Both comparison possibilities ignore the issue perspective: the phase with no news coverage or public outrage. The thunder condition reflects news coverage created by another party, indicating actual crisis. In other words, both potential cases or possibilities, merely highlight the party that disclosed information first, but disregard the function of information—to form transparency and credibility or respond to a threat.

In terms of the process continuum between an issue and a crisis, there is a place for strategic communication to shift from the domain of voluntary, self-disclosure toward a need for mandatory disclosure. Understanding more about why organizations adopt such communication strategies and the consequences of doing so is needed.

In a similar vein, scholars have noted that there are different levels of disclosure available that cause a perceptual gap between message recipients. Whittington and Yakis-Douglas (2010) give insight: two types of disclosure exist, including either voluntary disclosure or a more mandatory disclosure. They showed that if people thought information disclosure was mandatory and inevitable for an organization, the effect of the disclosure would not be significant to the audience in evaluating the organization.

Guided by a literature review of disclosure studies and studies regarding the function of issues management (Kim, Hong, & Cameron, 2011; Sweetser, 2010; Whittington & Yakis-Douglas, 2010), the present study operationalizes three types of proactive disclosure that can be made by an organization in terms of the proactive issues phase: voluntary self-disclosure, responsive disclosure, and obligatory disclosure.

Following stealing thunder studies (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011) and Whittington and Yakis-Douglas (2010), there is a first condition of voluntary self-disclosure in which an organization discloses full details of information to a public before it is claimed by anyone else. As the second condition, this study illustrates responsive disclosure, which refers to a claim asserting that the organization discloses given information in response to a few issues raised by journalists. However, it is different from reactive crisis communication, in that a crisis has not yet occurred when organizations use responsive disclosure. The term comes from Heath and Palenchar (2009b), in which the authors call for company websites and any other self-operated outlets to be responsive with information to help key publics regarding a particular issue.

As the last condition, obligatory disclosure (i.e., a condition when an organization claims to comply with government agencies, and is thus perceived as mandatory and inevitable for the organization) is perceived as similar to the thunder condition (i.e., an organization's weakness, mistake, or failure is first revealed by another party); however, it is different from the claims made in thunder. In other words, in obligatory disclosure, organizations state that they are disclosing the full details of information in a particular issue phase to correct misunderstanding. As Plaisance states that public trust can be established "by revealing all information needed for responsible decision-making" (Plaisance, 2007, p. 197), different levels of information disclosure claimed by an organization may affect credibility perceptions toward the company. Figure 2 illustrates the degree to which the three disclosure claims are situated along the process continuum between the issue phase and the crisis stage (see Figure 2).

Figure2. An Integrated Framework for the Process Continuum of Disclosure Claims

Proactive Issue Phase ⟷ Reactive Crisis Phase

Voluntary | Responsive | Obligatory | Traditional Thunder Condition*

Note: *Thunder condition adapted from Stealing Thunder Literatures (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Williams, Bourgeois, & Croyle, 1993)

Disclosure Claims as Commodities and Severity of an Issue

Besides credibility and transparency as important outcomes associated with different levels of proactive disclosure, severity of an issue is another important variable to assessment of public response toward such an issue revealing strategy. Previous studies in commodity theory explain that released information is like a commodity: obtaining more commodities may result in less value attached to free information (Brock, 1968; Brock & Brannon, 1992; Lev, 1992). Specifically, scholars used the commodity theory in illustrating the ways in which stealing thunder can reduce the perceived significance of given negative information (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Williams et al., 1993). From a meta analysis of studies regarding commodity theory, Lynn (1992) showed strong support for this theory’s proposition in that a commodity’s value is enhanced when it is unavailable and scant.

Brock initially described the concept of the commodity similarly under this theory: the more unavailable any commodity is, the more valuable it is (Brock, 1968). It follows that Brock and Brannon sought to define commodities such that “commodities referred to useful things —messages, experiences, and material objects —that were conveyable from person to person and that are potentially possession” (Brock & Brannon, 1992, p. 136).

Thus, the definition of commodity refers to anything that has usefulness to a person and that is conveyable from that person to another.

To illustrate, if a communicator is forthcoming by voluntarily providing information to a public, that information is regarded plentiful and, therefore, of little value. The opposite is true if the speaker conceals information with no comment. With concealment, that information is perceived as secret or unavailable information, which, in turn, carries more value and lets the receiver seek more information (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Williams et al., 1993).

Quoting Hamilton and Zanna (1974), Arpan and Pompper (2003) further bolstered this prediction in terms of inconsistency between journalists' beliefs toward disclosed information from organizations and given free information. For example, journalists likely expect organizations or public relations practitioners to hide negative information associated with them. Hence, if they are upfront to reveal negative issues, then they can consider such self-disclosed information from organizations as an apparent paradox. In order to solve this paradox, journalists or any receivers of that self-disclosure could discount the value of the particular message or reduce the significance (severity) of a crisis as a result (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Given that any information will increase in value and significance to the extent that it is seen as available and freely given, organizations' voluntarily disclosure claims regarding any negative issues are more likely to be considered as plentiful and highly available information. Such voluntary claims will therefore downplay the severity of that given issue, rather than corporate statements situated as either responsive or obligatory disclosure signifying relatively unavailable information.

Following this proposition, it is important to know whether publics regard a greater level of information disclosure as more commodities to be obtained, resulting in less value attached to free information. Publics' perceived severity associated with a given issue could be reduced by relative information disclosed from an organization (Lev, 1992). On the other hand, a higher level of proactive disclosure (a voluntary condition) employed by an organization might lead to greater perceptions associated with negativity of a given issue among the audience. Therefore, proactive self-disclosure might elevate the severity of an issue. Likewise, Arpan and Pompper (2003) did not reveal the impact of self-disclosure on participants' perceptions on severity of a crisis. Therefore, it is important to know whether the three levels of proactive disclosure could lead to reduction of the severity of a given issue in eyes of a public.

Facebook Sharing and the Impact of a Referral Source

Concerning the outlet where corporations freely reveal its disclosure statements, the present study seeks to operationalize organizations' social media pages as the potential platforms for carrying messages in that messages have "a growing role in news discovery and distribution" (The State of the News Media, 2012). From the State of the News Media's Annual Report (2012), the public tends to rely on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) for consuming and distributing news. Social media accounts for about 8.6% of traffic to news sites, which is almost half as much search engine generated traffic to news sites.

Beyond bringing in significant traffic to news sites, Facebook, as one of the leading social media sites, has its own viral characteristics for distributing particular information within its site (Bradshaw, 2011). Specifically, Facebook users spent seven hours on the site in December 2011, whereas CNN users spent just 30 minutes per month (The State of the News Media, 2012). Additionally, consumers tend to read suggested content within news organizations' Facebook pages instead of searching for additional information on news organizations' websites (Bradshaw, 2011).

In terms of site use, Facebook users actively share, like, or recommend a given story. For example, Thompson (2012) stressed the importance of the sharing function of information within Facebook: the social media site has empowered readers in a manner in which opinion, breaking news, fact, or any content appearing on the site are likely to go viral via a sharing effect. If a person clicks "share" or "like" button for particular content that he or she would like to discuss and share with others, it ultimately appears in their friends' front pages, or newsfeeds.

Besides such industrial reports and statistics, scholars also describe the ways in which social media change public exposure to issues or threats. That is, although an organization can employ different levels of proactive disclosure as a propositional move, issues management is rhetorical in nature (Heath, 2010). If a voluntary, self-disclosure is used by a particular company, a public may hear about the issue from others via online platforms prior to exposure to the corporate disclosure; the value of that official disclosure may then be disregarded. Consistent with reality, the new media environment is where a "multitude of discussions and arguments occur each day on new communication technologies" (Heath & Palenchar, 2009b, p. 231). In other words, new communication technologies offer options that increase quick access to others' opinions, facts, and concerns (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). Thus, it is important to know the impact of Facebook's sharing function and whether the factor could interact with the three levels of proactive disclosure claims made by organizations in affecting audience perceptions toward organizations and issues.

Going back to the commodity theory, this study seeks to explain the proposition regarding the moderating effect of friends' sharing of corporations' disclosure claims and the referral to given company-structured messages in terms of Brock and Brannon's study (1992). Brock and Brannon (1992) proposed a liberalization of commodity theory, illustrating that increased message and cognitive elaboration prompted by scarcity (unavailability) of information leads to valuation polarization. In their conceptualization, the liberalization of commodity theory extended its scope to negative objects (e.g., serious illness), while the original theory (Brock, 1968) merely included positively valenced objects in stressing the values and usefulness of that object.

Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), they identified message and cognitive elaboration as a mediator between scarcity (less commodities) and evaluative polarization (positive or negative attitudes toward commodities). That is, an absence of negative information (e.g., illness) makes information more desirable and valuable, which would be translated as active elaboration upon the message in the ELM. Bozzolo and Brock (1992) also supported this argument such that in their experiment, subjects who were low in need for cognition became more motivated to think about the message to the extent that the message was unavailable.

In such a scenario, a person is more likely to elaborate on his or her own thoughts about the commodity (an issue or threat) and that initial response will be negative. It follows that increased message elaboration can lead to less positive attitudes toward a negatively toned message compared to present and available messaging (Brock & Brannon, 1992). In other words, such a negative commodity, according to the theory, would be regarded as more aversive to the extent that it was rare. In turn, this makes evaluations toward that commodity more extreme.

More importantly, Brock and Brannon (1992) illuminates the underlying mechanism moderating the scarcity – evaluation relationship such that differential perception of scarcity would be moderated by the proposed factors: “few possessors of the commodity, few sources of the commodity, greater coercion necessary to obtain the commodity, greater source effort to withhold or provide the commodity, greater effort necessary to obtain the commodity, greater restriction of the commodity and the greater number of reasons supporting the restriction, greater delay in obtaining the commodity, and so forth” (Brock & Brannon, 1992, p. 139).

In terms of the factors affecting perception of scarcity, a friend’s referral can affect the perceived extent of unavailability of given information. In the proactive issue phase, a public is likely to be low in need for cognition due to few possessors of the object (e.g., few victims, few interest groups), few sources of the object (e.g., no news coverage), and greater effort necessary to obtain the object (e.g., an issue may likely be internal or a few public aware of it). In other words, a friend’s referral of given information (corporate disclosure claims), according to the liberalization of commodity theory, is expected to reduce scarcity perceptions on that information, and thereby downplays evaluative scrutiny of more information and behavioral correspondence related to negative information.

Given that “scarcity motivates more thinking about the object or about the message's advocacy” (Brock & Brannon, 1992, p. 138), a referral source would act as a moderator for the perception of scarcity of given information, which ultimately affects evaluations toward the content. In the new media environment, if a particular issue is brought out by both the corporations and the public, as it is when there is a referral source to disclosure claims, it should be seen as less scarce and should carry less weight than if only one side mentions the issue (absence of a referral source). Recall that any given issue includes negative information, assuming that the message divulges threats to a public. Following the argument of Brock and Brannon (1992), if no information is provided in this situation, the public is more likely to elaborate on his or her own thoughts about the commodity (an issue or threat), and that initial response will be negative. On the contrary, if readily accessible external information regarding the particular issue is presented, a public will search for and study a company-generated argument instead of the commodity itself. In this process, given corporate disclosure claims that others refer to and read would decrease the scarcity of that issue, and let the message recipient read and elaborate more on that given message. This process or outcome may augment the intended effects of disclosure claims.

2-4. Hypotheses

Given the review of relevant literature, it could be hypothesized that a company's higher levels of proactive disclosure of information (voluntary) will receive a more favorable assessment of organizational transparency than when the disclosure is described as obligatory, or even when the disclosure is deemed responsive. Thus, the first hypotheses relates to the effects of different levels of proactive disclosure on perceived transparency of an organization involved in an issue:

H1: Different disclosure claims will influence participants' perceptions on organizational transparency.

H1a: Participants are more likely to report greater organizational transparency when they read a corporate statement claiming voluntary disclosure as compared to when they view responsive disclosure.

H1b: Participants are more likely to report greater organizational transparency when they read a corporate statement claiming voluntary disclosure as compared to when they view obligatory disclosure.

H1c: Participants are more likely to report greater organizational transparency when they read a corporate statement claiming responsive disclosure as compared to when they view obligatory disclosure.

Similarly, proactive disclosure statements can affect a company's credibility ratings such that the organization is perceived to be more credible when it voluntarily reveals corporate issues regarding ongoing threats than when the same issue appears as either responsive or obligatory disclosure. In this regard, the second hypotheses are proposed:

H2: Different levels of proactive disclosure will influence participants' credibility perceptions toward a given organization.

H2a: The participants are likely to rate the company as more credible when they read the voluntary disclosure condition as opposed when they view responsive disclosure.

H2b: The participants are likely to rate the company as more credible when they read the voluntary disclosure condition as opposed when they view obligatory disclosure.

H2c: The participants are likely to rate the company as more credible when they read the responsive disclosure condition as opposed when they view obligatory disclosure.

Moreover, the third hypothesis illustrating the effects of organizational transparency ratings on its subsequent credibility perceptions toward the corporation is advanced:

H3: Participants' perceived organizational transparency ratings on disclosure claims will influence their credibility perceptions of an organization.

Guided by commodity theory, this study also proposes that people may liken the highly proactive disclosure (voluntary) to relatively large amount of information and regard it as less valuable, and in turn rate a given issue as less severe. Thus, the following hypotheses illustrating the impact of a proactive self-disclosure on participant perceptions of crisis severity are presented:

H4: Different levels of proactive disclosure will influence participants' perceived severity of a given issue.

H4a: The participants are more likely to report greater perceptions of severity of an issue when they read the voluntary disclosure condition as opposed to when they view responsive disclosure.

H4b: The participants are more likely to report greater perceptions of severity of an issue when they read the voluntary disclosure condition as opposed to when they view obligatory disclosure.

H4c: The participants are more likely to report greater perceptions of severity of an issue when they read the responsive disclosure condition as opposed to when they view obligatory disclosure.

Finally, the present study examines the effectiveness of organizations' self-disclosure with concerns about how publics are actually exposed to an organization-disclosed message. Given that this study examines the impact of organizations' voluntarily, self-disclosing statement regarding the unfolding of their negative issues on publics' perceptions, and that Facebook can make such specific disclosures viral, this study operationalizes the impact of Facebook sharing as the presence and the absence of a referral source to disclosure claims. It follows that if one's friends refer to read disclosure claims posed by an organization, the referral source would decrease the perceived availability of information, and let the message recipient elaborate more on that given message. Logically, this ultimately augments the positive effects of disclosure claims. Thus, the following research hypothesis and question are submitted:

H5: The different levels of disclosure statements will interact with the presence of a referral source to the corporate statements to increase the participants' perceived severity of an issue.

RQ1: Will the presence of a referral source influence perceived organizational transparency?

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

3-1. Pilot Study

Before conducting the main experiment, a pilot study was used to determine the stimulus issues and companies and to check disclosure claims as to whether each claim could work as intended. By using snowball sampling, 38 adults, predominantly residents in Columbia, Missouri, participated in the pretest. Their demographic information is as follows: there were more females (54.1%) than males (45.9 %) and there were Caucasian or White (55.3%), and Asian (34.2%), African American (7.9%), and 2.6% stated they were regarded as Latino or Hispanic. The average age of participants was approximately 31 (*M*=31.05). The average hours of computer use per day was 6.41; the average hours of Facebook use was 1.13 hours per day; and the average number of fan pages the participants subscribed to was approximately 13 (*M*=12.78).

In order to create systematic message variance between levels of treatments, multiple corporate issues were selected from the LexisNexis database. As shown in Table 1, a trained graduate student working as a journalist revised the actual news stories about issues with similar wording and created factual claims reflecting three different disclosures.

Table 1 Pretesting Messages for Pilot Study

Message Variation	Description
Story 1	A sportswear manufacturer accidentally allowed a toxic chemical to spill from its factory and the chemical is known to be bio-accumulative and might be harmful to the environment and to human health.

Story 2	A clothing manufacturer has detected that traces of toxic chemicals have been detected in products made by the company. These chemicals might be putting their consumers at risk.
Story 3	A mobile/smart phone might cause serious harmful effects of electromagnetic radiation exposure. The part of the radio waves that are emitted by the specific product could increase the risk of headaches, visual disturbance and migraines.
Story 4	A beer is expected to pose a health threat to the general population. The new packaging used by the product, especially in its canned products, might pose health risks.
Story 5	A new preservative used in a soft drink manufacturing seemed to make consumers ill. The drink contains a preservative that could increase consumer risk of gastritis and nausea.
Voluntary disclosure claim	"In the best interest of our consumers, we believe it is important to disclose the following information to achieve public awareness of a potential health risk ………………………………To keep our public informed of this potential health risk, we are voluntarily sharing this information."
Responsive disclosure claim	"Concerning potential health risks reported by the New York Times, we have decided to share the following information with our consumers……….In response to the news,~"
Obligatory disclosure claim	"In compliance with concerns raised by the Food and Drug Administration's requirements, we are releasing the following statement……………………… We are revealing this information to follow the protocol from the officials and to alert the public about potential health risks reported from the FDA."

To choose stimulus companies, the participants were asked to rate their organization/product involvement scores toward seven well-known corporations in the U.S.: McDonald's, GAP, Walmart, Nike, Budweiser, Dr Pepper, and Apple (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). According to the results of paired-samples t-tests, Nike, Apple and Walmart were selected as stimulus companies, given that their perceived involvement scores were not statistically different from each other (see Table 2).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Pilot Study

Organization Involvement	M	SD
Nike	4.33	1.52
Wal-Mart	4.65	1.72
Apple	4.60	1.61
GAP	3.91	1.34
Dr Pepper	3.25	1.47
McDonald's	3.73	1.52
Budweiser	3.09	1.60

Pairs	t	df	p
Nike - Wal-Mart	-1.03	37	.31
Nike - Apple	-.95	37	.35
Apple- Wal-Mart	.13	37	.90

Severity perceptions toward five corporate issues

	Pair Differences			
Pairs	M	SD	t	P
S1 – S2	.07	1.16	.37	.71
S1 – S3	.03	1.76	.09	.93
S1 – S4	.40	1.56	1.60	.12
S1 – S5	-.14	1.84	-.47	.64
S2 – S3	-.04	1.36	-.20	.84
S2 – S4	.33	1.62	1.27	.21
S2 – S5	-.21	1.79	-.73	.47
S3 – S4	.38	1.52	1.53	.13
S3 – S5	-.17	1.91	-.54	.59
S4 – S5*	-.54	1.41	-2.38	.02*

Note: N=38, Hypothesis df = 37, *p<.05.

Regarding the perception of severity of issues, the participants were asked to read about five different corporate issues and then they were asked to rate the degree to which they felt that a given issue was serious/bad/severe with a seven-point Likert scale (Arpan

& Pompper, 2003). In order to control for the effects of different levels of severity perception originally caused by the nature of issues on the primary dependent variables, this pilot study sought to find story pairs that would have similar perceived severity scores. As shown in Table 2, most of the pairs were not statistically different from one another in terms of the severity perceptions, while the pair for story 4 (e.g., the new packaging used by a beer, especially in its canned products, might pose health risks) and that of story 5 (e.g., a new preservative used in a soft drink manufacturing might cause illness) were statistically different from one another. Among potential pairs, the present study chose stories 2, 3, and 4 (see Table 2).

Finally, participants answered whether "this company is voluntarily disclosingthe information," which was measured on a 7-pointLikert scale (*1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree*). According to the results of a repeated-measured of ANOVA, the participants perceived differences between disclosure claims: voluntary disclosure as the most voluntarily disclosed one (M = 5.61, SD = 1.37), compared to either the responsive disclosure (M = 4.47, SD= 1.93) or the obligatory disclosure (M = 3.66, S.D. = 1.88); the statistical difference was significant, F (2, 36) = 16.180, p < .001. Thus, the three disclosure statements could be used in the main experiment.

3-2. Design

In order to test the proposed hypotheses and research questions, I conducted an experiment using online instruments. The design was a 3 (*types of disclosure*: voluntary disclosure vs. responsive disclosure vs. obligatory disclosure) X 2 (*referral source*: presence vs. absence) mixed-subjects factorial design experiment. *Types of disclosure* served as the within-subjects factor, while *referral source served* as the between-subjects factor.

Using fractional experimental design, each disclosure claim as the within-subject factor varied by two different stories: voluntary disclosure of story 1 and 2, responsive disclosure of story 2 and 3, and obligatory disclosure of story 1 and 3. Thus, a fractured cross combination of the two different messages and two between-subject levels (presence vs. absence of a referral source) resulted in four conditions. For example, Table 3 shows the pool of message combinations for within-subjects and participants were randomly assigned to one of four different fractional combinations of condition (See Table 3).

Table 3 The Pool of Fractured Message Combinations for Within-Subjects

Between-factor: A Referral source	Message Combination
Presence	Voluntary. Story 1 + Responsive. Story 2 + Obligatory. Story3
Presence	Voluntary. Story 2 + Responsive. Story 3 + Obligatory. Story1
Absence	Voluntary. Story 1 + Responsive. Story 2 + Obligatory. Story3
Absence	Voluntary. Story 2 + Responsive. Story 3 + Obligatory. Story1

Participants' prior involvement perceptions toward the stimulus corporations were measured as a control variable. The dependent variables were participants' perceived transparency associated with a stimuli company, their ratings of credibility toward the company, and severity of a stimuli issue.

The sample size was calculated with G*Power software: total sample size = 138 (effect size = .30, alpha =.05, power = .80, numerator df (factor levels -1) = 3, and number of groups = 2).For the main experiment, N = 142 participants were recruited from

Midwest Cities: *n*= 72 of the presence of the referral source condition (a sentence priming participants to learn a stimuli disclosure statement through a friend's sharing prior to the exposure to the corporate statement) and *n* = 70 of the absence of the referral source condition (a sentence priming participants to read the stimuli disclosure statement by chance) were asked to read the three different states of the disclosure statements for the within-factor condition.

3-3. Stimuli

Guided by the pilot study pretesting stimuli companies and issues, three different corporate issues were selected: 1) Nike, as the sportswear manufacturer, divulges the fact that traces of toxic chemicals have been detected in its products, 2) Apple shares the fact concerning potential harmful effects of electromagnetic radiation exposure from the iPhone 4, and 3) Wal-Mart reveals that a new preservative used in Wal-Mart's Great Value private label food line may make consumers ill.

All three issue scenarios were about a corporation's business-related issue posing reputational and financial threats, would the issues become public knowledge and break into crises. Considering the conceptual and operational definitions of the three different levels of proactive disclosure claims, each condition included sentences from the pilot test.

Based upon stealing thunder studies (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011), the experimental manipulation of voluntary disclosure was evident only in the stated claims that given information was voluntarily disclosed by an organization (i.e., "we believe it is important to disclose the following information to achieve public awareness of a potential health risk," or "we voluntarily divulge the fact that…"). Grounded in the manipulations used in previous stealing thunder studies (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005), sentences stressing the voluntary, self-disclosure were also included to maximize the manipulation (i.e., "we felt it was necessary to alert our consumers).

In the condition of responsive disclosure, there were claims asserting that the organization disclosed given information in responding to a few journalists raising an issue (i.e., "concerning potential health risks reported by the New York Times, we have decided to share the following information with our consumers," or "In response to the news…."). Sentences illustrating the time frame that a journalist first reported about given issue were also used (i.e., "Earlier this week, a New York Times journalist reported that…").

Finally, in the condition of obligatory disclosure, a corporate claim revealed that the company was sharing information to comply with government agencies: "In accordance with the Food and Drug Administration's requirements (FDA), we are releasing the following statement," or "In compliance with concerns raised by the Center for Environmental Health (CEH), we are releasing the following statement." Also, claims reflecting the mandatory nature of disclosure were included (i.e., "we are revealing this information to follow the protocol from the officials and to alert the public about potential health risks reported from the FDA," or "the FDA felt it was necessary to inform the public").

Dimension of the referral source to exposure to corporate statements was manipulated by differentiating the Facebook page the participants first viewed. For the presence of the referral source condition, the participants read the instructions as follows: “Imagine you are exploring Facebook. Assume that Peter is your friend and your friend has shared the following post.” After that, they viewed a screenshot of the Facebook page in which “Peter” shared three URL links for different issues. For the absence condition, the participants were informed that “you came across the following post,” and then they viewed the similar page without any mentioning of the referral source. Everything but the manipulated independent variable was the same.

3-4. Procedure

The individuals who agreed to participate in the study were asked to type in or click the URL link, which acted to randomly distribute one of the four different conditions to each participant. Once clicking on the link, the participants were provided with online informed consent briefly describing the study. After the participants agreed to the consent form by clicking on a corresponding button, they were asked to answer a few pre-exposure questions (e.g., their organization/brand involvement toward stimuli companies). Before being exposed to the within-subjects factor (i.e., three levels of disclosure claims), participants were guided to view a screenshot illustrating either the presence or the absence of a referral source condition with corresponding instructions.

In each condition, the participants viewed three different corporate statements disclosing recent issues and subsequent information regarding potential risk. The participants were asked to rate the same set of questions (perceived organizational transparency, credibility of an organization, and severity of an issue) after viewing the organization’s disclosure claims. This process was repeated three times. After completing all trials, the participants responded to a brief survey including demographic items regarding gender, age, education, household income, and race, as well as Facebook usage. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to provide their email addresses to receive a $5 gift card from Starbucks. The experiment lasted for approximately 20 minutes.

3-5. Participants

A total of 142 adults were recruited to participate in this study. Participants were recruited predominately from Columbia, MO. The researcher left flyers with staff members in various departments in a Midwestern university and posted solicitation for the study on bulletin boards at local coffee shops, shopping malls, and so forth. The convenience sample of participants was told that they would be participating in a study investigating Facebook users' responses to recent corporate issues. They were informed that they would receive $5 Starbucks gift cards for their time after completion of the online study. The recruitment process began once it was approved by the campus Institutional Review Board at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

A larger percentage of the participants were females (70.4%, n = 100) than males (29.6%, n = 42). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 68, with an average age of 35.44. The majority of the participants were Caucasian or White (70.4%, n = 100), while 12.7% (n = 18) were Asian, 4.7% (n = 7) were African American, and 4.7% (n = 7) were Latino or Hispanic. The majority of participants (88.7%, n = 126) had at least some college school education; and 46.1% (n = 65) had advanced degrees (M.A., Ph.D., M.D., J.D., etc.). These statistics suggest a well-educated sample. As for household income, the majority of participants (53.2%, n = 75) made $50,000 and above.

Additionally, the descriptive analyses reveal that the participants' average time spent in Facebook per day was approximately 2 hours. The participants ranged in their number of Facebook fan page subscriptions from 1 to 550, with an average number of 31.01 fan page subscriptions. Thus, they were considered appropriate participants in the current study because of their active use of Facebook as the stimuli platform.

3-6. Measurement

Perceptions of Organizational Transparency. As an attempt to identify the consequences of transparency efforts, Rawlins (2009) initially constructed measures of stakeholder evaluation of organizational transparency in terms of three transparency reputation traits (integrity, respect for others, and openness) and four transparency efforts (participation, substantial information, accountability, and secrecy). Eleven items were selected and used from Rawlins' Transparency Efforts Scale to measure the participants' evaluations of an organization's transparency with three constructs: 1) 5-items for substantial information (i.e., "The organization provides information that is complete; is timely; is relevant; is expressed in clear language; and that is reliable."), 2) 4-items for accountability (i.e., "The organization provides information that is balanced; admits mistakes when it has made mistakes; is forthcoming with information that might be damaging to the organization; is open to criticism by people like me."), and 3) 2-items for secrecy (i.e., "The organization would often leave out important details in the information it provides; only discloses information when it is required.”). A scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) was used (α = .93).

Credibility of an Organization. Perceptions of organizational credibility were measured using three 7-point semantic differential items. The three-item scale assessed the degree to which participants feel credibility toward a stimulus company. This was recorded on a scale from 1 (*dishonest/untrustworthy/insincere*) to 7 (*honest/trustworthy/sincere*) (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; McCroskey & Young, 1981; Wood & Eagly, 1981) (α = .84).

Severity of an Issue. A three-item measure was used to assess perceptions of issue severity. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they felt about a given issue from 1 (*not at all serious/ not at all bad/ not at all severe*) to 7 (*extremely serious/extremely bad/extremely severe*) (Arpan & Pompper, 2003) (α =.80).

Control Variable.

Organization/product involvement. In this study, the level of organization/product involvement toward a stimulus company was used as the control variable. Statistically controlling for the effects of other continuous variables that are not of primary interest, this study would have likely chosen a reliable covariate if it significantly correlated with one or more dependent variables. However, because of possible strong correlations among multiple covariates, using more than one covariate may not have contributed much to explaining the relationship. Even though a single covariate is not likely to control for all possible confounding effects, a single, well-selected covariate can reduce bias caused by confounding factors and can increase the statistical power of the analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

According to the liberalization of commodity theory (Brock & Brannon, 1992) and stealing thunder studies (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos Ewoldsen, 2005), perceived organization/product involvement would likely be related to both corporate credibility and organizational transparency perceptions.

Organization/product involvement was measured by three 7-point items that assessed the extent to which participants agreed with the following statements: "I hold a generally positive attitude toward the company; often buy the product of the company; and feel the product of the company is extremely important to me" on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) (Arpan & Roskos Ewoldsen, 2005) (α =.88).

3-7. Analyses

The main effect of the three levels of disclosure claims on the two primary dependent variables (i.e., credibility and transparency perceptions) was tested using a repeated-measures of MANCOVA with pre-existing organization/product involvement as a covariate.

According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), compared to ANOVA, MANOVA investigates whether mean differences among groups on a combination of dependent variables are likely to occur by chance. Thus, MANOVA can guard against issues regarding the inflation of Type I error by using multiple tests of correlated dependent variables; it can also reveal differences not shown in separate ANOVAs with a single dependent variable. Prior to running a MANOVA, correlations between the dependent variables were examined to justify the use of multivariate analysis. A correlation test between transparency and credibility was conducted. The Pearson correlation indicated that a strong, positive, and significant relationship existed between transparency and credibility perceptions (r = .84, p <.001).

Additionally, a two-way mixed ANCOVA was conducted to test the main and interaction effects of the referral source condition (presence vs. absence) and the disclosure claims (voluntary vs. responsive vs. obligatory) on the participants' severity perceptions.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

4-1. Manipulation Check

To see if the participants recognized the difference between the manipulations, they were asked a series of questions. To measure for referral source, the participants were asked to indicate their levels of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) as to whether they were invited to view a given corporate statement by their friend or by chance. To measure disclosure claims, the participants were also asked to indicate their levels of agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*) as to whether the stimuli company was voluntarily disclosing the information or required to reveal the information.

The manipulation check of disclosure claims was tested using paired sample t-tests. Responses to two items measuring disclosure claims were averaged to create composite scores for the manipulation check. The results of the t-tests indicate that the participants more so agreed that the corporate statement was voluntarily disclosed when they received the voluntary disclosure condition ($M_{voluntary}$ = 4.26, SD = 1.48) versus when they received a responsive condition ($M_{responsive}$ = 3.82, SD = 1.52; t (141) = 3.22, $p < .01$) and when they viewed an obligatory condition ($M_{obligatory}$ = 2.74, SD = 1.43; t (141) = 8.10, $p < .001$). In the same vein, the participants recognized the difference between the responsive disclosure condition and the obligatory disclosure condition (M_{diff} = 1.08; t (141) = 6.67, $p < .001$).

The manipulation check of the referral source was tested using independent samples t-tests. Results revealed that the participants agreed that when a referral source (a friend) was presented, the participants agreed that they were referred to read the corporate statement by the friend (M = 5.10, SD = 1.46) compared to the absence of the referral source condition (M = 3.61, SD = 1.16; t (140) = 6.69, p < .001). These results suggest that the manipulation of the disclosure claims and the referral source were successful.

4-2. Hypotheses Testing

The Impact of Disclosure Claims on Credibility and Transparency Perceptions

H1 and H2 predicted that the participants would report significantly greater organizational transparency (H1) and greater ratings of the credibility perceptions toward the stimuli organization (H2) when viewing voluntary disclosure compared to when reading the responsive or obligatory condition.

The effect of disclosure claims on organizational transparency perception and corporate credibility was tested using a repeated measures of MANCOVA with pre-existing organization involvement as a covariate. It is assumed that when there is a high correlation between a nuisance variable and a dependent variable, the nuisance variable can be used as a covariate (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). In this respect, a correlation test between the participants' pre-existing organization/product involvement and the two primary dependent variables was conducted. The Pearson correlation showed that a moderate, positive and significant relationship existed between the perceived organization/product involvement and credibility perceptions (r = .56, p <.001); the same was true between the pre-existing involvement and organizational transparency (r = .52, p

<.001). Before the pre-existing involvement toward stimulus companies was introduced in the MANCOVA analysis, it was centered to guard against an issue regarding the alteration of the main effects of within-subjects factors caused by the addiction of a covariate (Delaney & Maxwell, 1981). [1]

First, the results of the repeated measures MANCOVA revealed that the effect of the disclosure claims was significant on the two dependent variables [Wilks Λ= .58, F (4, 137) = 25.13, p<.001, η_p^2= .42]. In other words, the combined dependent variables were significantly affected by the disclosure claims.

According to the univariate analyses, there was a significant difference between voluntary, responsive, and obligatory disclosure conditions on participants' ratings of organizational transparency [F (1, 140) =34.52, p<.001, η_p^2= .20], and their perceptions of corporate credibility [F (1, 140) = 38.67, p<.001, η_p^2= .22].

For organizational transparency, the subsequent pair-wise comparisons illustrated that the participants perceived organizations as more transparent when they used voluntary disclosure claims (M = 4.55, SE = .08) as opposed to the responsive disclosure condition (M = 3.80, SE = .09) and the obligatory disclosure condition (M = 3.79, SE = .09). In other words, participants were more likely to report greater organizational transparency when they were exposed to the voluntary disclosure claims posed by an

[1] Conceptually, while the addition of a covariate to a repeated measures analysis should not alter the main effects of within-subjects factors, the repeated measures ANCOVA or MANCOVA can change the main effect of the repeated measure, compared to assessing this main effect via a simple repeated measures ANOVA (Delaney & Maxwell, 1981). Delaney and Maxwell (1981, p.107) discuss the origin of this difference and calculate the difference in sums of squared error that arises from the addition of a covariate. That is, the difference arises because the repeated measures factor is calculated in terms of such difference score and the covariation of the covariate and the difference score is used to adjust the sums-of-squares. More specifically, the addition of a covariate to the repeated measure analysis will not alter the main effects—only if either the regression coefficient for predicting the mean difference score from the covariate is zero, or the mean of the covariate is itself zero. In conclusion, Delaney and Maxwell (1981) suggest eliminating the change in the main effect by *mean centering the covariate* prior to running the ANCOVA or MANCOVA. Thus, the analysis for H1 and H2 used the method of mean centering the covariate.

organization, as opposed to when they viewed either responsive or obligatory disclosures. Thus, H1a and H1b were supported.

However, there was no significant mean difference between the responsive disclosure vs. the obligatory disclosure condition, failing to support H1c (M_{diff} = .01, *SE* = .11, *p* = 1.00). That is, when reading a corporate disclosure statement responding to a journalist, the participants' organizational transparency perceptions were not statistically different from when they viewed the disclosure claims in compliance with the government agencies (see Table 4).

Table 4 Summary of Results for the Main Effects of Disclosure Claims

Dependent Variables	Mean			F	p	η_p^2
	Volun.	Resp.	Obli.			
Transparency	4.55 (1.11)	3.80 (1.15)	3.79 (1.11)	34.52	.000***	.269
Credibility	5.05 (1.39)	3.97 (1.54)	3.85 (1.47)	38.67	.000***	.373

Note: Hypothesis df = 1, error df = 140 for all F tests. *** p < .001. Numbers in parentheses represent standard deviations

For corporate credibility perceptions, the results of the pairwise comparisons revealed significant difference between the voluntary disclosure and the responsive disclosure group (M_{diff} = .75, *SE* = .10, *p* = .000) and significant difference between the voluntary and the obligatory condition (M_{diff} = .76, *SE* = .11, *p* = .000).

Specifically, the voluntary disclosure condition led to significantly greater ratings of the stimuli company's perceived credibility (*M* = 5.05, *SE* = .11) than the responsive disclosure (*M* = 3.97, *SE* = .12) and the obligatory disclosure condition (*M* = 3.85, *SE* =

.12). Thus, H2a and H2b were supported. Conversely, as shown in table 4, there was no significant mean difference for corporate credibility perceptions between the responsive disclosure vs. the obligatory disclosure condition, failing to support H2c (M_{diff} = .12, SE = .16, p = 1.00).

The Descriptive Analysis Regarding Organizational Transparency and Credibility

H3 proposed whether the participants' perceived organizational transparency ratings to disclosure claims influence their credibility perceptions of an organization. First of all, the hierarchical regression analysis was used to check this proposition. From the model summary table (see Table 5), it was believed that the organizational transparency variable may be an important predictor to compare to participants' pre-existing involvement to predict their ratings of corporate credibility. Organizational transparency perception was added to the model, which already included involvement scores to determine if R squared would significantly increase with the inclusion of the variable in the model. When adding transparency scores to the original model, R squared did significantly increase from .32 to .72, $F_{\text{change}}(1,139) = 204.11$, $p < .001$. Thus, transparency perceptions were included in the model.

The results of multiple regression analysis revealed that the participants' pre-existing involvement and organizational transparency perceptions together significantly predicted corporate credibility perceptions, while accounting for 72% of the variance in credibility perceptions (R^2_{adj}=.72), F (2,139) = 180.89, $p < .001$, supporting H3. Specifically, the participants' organizational transparency perceptions was a significant predictor of their credibility scores toward the company, $t(139) = 14.29$, $p < .001$, which uniquely accounted for 41% of the variance in credibility perceptions ($sr = .64$).

Table 5 Summary of Regression Analyses

Intercorrelations among variables (n=142)

Variable	Involvement	Transparency	Credibility
Involvement	--	0.523***	0.561***
Transparency		--	0.838***
Credibility			--

Note: ***$p < .001$

Model summary

Model	R^2_{adj}	R^2 change	df1	df2	Sig. F change
Involvement only*	.310	.315	1	140	.000
Involvement + Transparency**	.718	.408	1	139	.000

Note: * Predictors: (Constant), Involvement, ** Predictors: (Constant), Involvement, trans

The Impact of the Disclosure Claims on Severity Perceptions

H4 predicted whether the participants' perceived issue severity would significantly differ by the three levels of disclosure claims. The repeated measure of ANCOVA with the participants' prior involvement toward stimuli companies as a covariate was used to test the proposed hypotheses. The results of the ANCOVA demonstrated that the disclosure claims had a statistically significant difference in perceptions of issue severity (Wilks $\Lambda = .87$, $F(2, 139) = 10.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_{p2} = .13$).

According to the pairwise comparisons, when reading the voluntary disclosure, the participants perceived a given issue ($M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.33$) as less severe than when they were exposed to the obligatory disclosure (*M* = 5.12, *SD* = 1.31). The difference was statistically significant (M_{diff} = -.60, *SE* = .13, *p* = .000). Thus, H4b was supported.

However, the responsive condition (*M* = 4.81, *SD* = 1.37) did not yield significantly greater severity scores compared to the voluntary disclosure condition (M_{diff} = -.29, SE = .14, *p* = .11). Similarly, the responsive condition did not have significantly different severity perceptions from the obligatory condition (M_{diff} = -.32, *SE* = .14, *p* = .08). Thus, H4a and H4c were not supported.

The Interaction Effect between the Referral Source and Disclosure Claims

Guided by theoretical arguments from the liberalization of commodity theory (Brock & Brannon, 1992), H5 examined the moderating effect of referral source exposing the disclosure statements on the participants' perceived issue severity. Concerning the referral source as the between-subject factor, the two-way mixed ANCOVA with the previous company involvement as a covariate was used to test the main and the interaction effects of the disclosure claims and the referral source on the perceived severity of an issue. First, the results showed that the effect of the disclosure claims was significant on the issue severity perceptions [Wilks Λ= .87, $F(2,138) = 10.26$, $p < .001$, η_{p2}= .13]. However, the effect of the disclosure claims on the dependent variable did not significantly interact with the referral source to the corporate statements [Wilks Λ = .99, $F(2, 138) = .31$, $p = .73$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$]. According to the subsequent univariate analyses, the presence/absence of the referral source condition did not yield a statistically significant main effect on the participants' perceptions on given issues, $F(1, 139)$ = . 081, $p = .78$, η_{p2}= .001. Specifically, there was no significant difference between the presence of the referral source condition (M = 4.80, SE = .11) and the absence of the referral source condition (M = 4.84, SE = .11) on participants' severity perceptions toward stimuli issues. Thus, H5 was not supported.

The Impact of the Referral Source on Organizational Transparency

The proposed research question examined the impact of the referral source on the participants' perceived organizational transparency. The ANCOVA was used to test the impact of the referral source on the primary dependent variable, while controlling for the effect of the participants' pre-existing organization involvement. Results of univariate analysis revealed that presenting referral source in advance of the corporate statements (M = 3.94, SD = .93) did not yield organizational transparency perceptions differently than the same statements without the referral source (M = 4.16, SD = .76), $F(1, 139)$ = 2.49, p = .12, η_{p^2} = .02. Table 6 summarizes the findings.

Table 6 Summary of Results

Measured Effects	Hypotheses	Results
Main effect of disclosure claim on perceived organizational transparency	**H1:** Different levels of disclosure claims will influence participants' perceptions on organizational transparency.	S
	H1a: Participants are more likely to report greater organizational transparency when they read a corporate statement claiming voluntary disclosure as opposed to when they view responsive disclosure.	S
	H1b: Participants are more likely to report greater organizational transparency when they read a corporate statement claiming voluntary disclosure as opposed to when they view obligatory disclosure.	S

	H1c: Participants are more likely to report greater organizational transparency when they read a corporate statement claiming responsive disclosure as opposed to when they view obligatory disclosure.	NS
Main effect of disclosure claim on credibility perceptions toward an organization	**H2:** Different levels of proactive disclosure will influence participants' credibility perceptions toward a given organization.	S
	H2a: The participants are more likely to rate the company as credible when they read voluntary disclosure condition as opposed when they view responsive disclosure.	S
	H2b: The participants are more likely to rate the company as credible when they read voluntary disclosure condition as opposed when they view obligatory disclosure.	S
	H2c: The participants are more likely to rate the company as credible when they read responsive disclosure condition as opposed when they view obligatory disclosure.	NS
The impact of org. transparency on its credibility	**H3**: Participants' perceived organizational transparency ratings to disclosure claims will influence their credibility perceptions of an organization.	S
Main effect of disclosure claim on perceived severity of an issue	**H4:** Different levels of proactive disclosure will influence participants' perceived severity of given issue.	S
	H4a: The participants are more likely to report greater severity of an issue when they read voluntary disclosure condition as opposed to when they view responsive disclosure.	NS
	H4b: The participants are more likely to report greater severity of an issue when they read voluntary disclosure condition as opposed to when they view obligatory disclosure.	S
	H4c: The participants are more likely to report	NS

	greater severity of an issue when they read responsive disclosure condition as opposed to when they view obligatory disclosure.	
Two-way interaction between disclosure claim and the referral source on severity of an issue	**H5**: The different levels of disclosure statements will interact with the presence of a referral source to the corporate statements to increase the participants' perceived severity of an issue.	NS
The effect of the referral source on org. transparency	**RQ1**: Will the presence of a referral source influence perceived organizational transparency?	NS

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

5-1. Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of the three types of disclosure statements claimed and shared by corporations on the public perceptions of three important variables regarding potential threats: organizational transparency, perceived credibility toward a stimuli company, and severity of given issue. Particularly, this experimental study first identified the concept of a public relations issue as a business-related, ongoing threat to an organization and as the preceding phase of a crisis. It follows that beyond existing literature in stealing thunder focusing more on whether the crisis was revealed by oneself vs. others via the news media platform (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos Ewoldsen, 2005; Wigley, 2011), the present study sought to attain a better understanding of the effects of voluntary, self-disclosure claims of a public relations issue on audience perceptions when they are released directly from an organization . In doing so, I argue that the three different types of disclosure claims in an organization’s statement may exist in terms of the time process between an issue and a crisis: 1) the voluntary, self-disclosure seeking to inform public regarding potential risk that a corporate issue poses, 2) the responsive disclosure aiming to respond to journalists claiming the corporate issue and therefore, aiming to correct information, and 3) the obligatory disclosure situated as mandatory compliance with government agencies’ requests to inform the public. With respect to these arguments and proposed hypotheses, the present study conducted an experiment with a sample of 142 non-students in the online setting to enhance external validity. The following section will discuss the key findings and their implications.

5-2. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Main Effects of Disclosure Claims on Organizational Transparency and Credibility

This study examined the effects of proactive disclosure claims (voluntary vs. responsive vs. obligatory) in the context of corporate issue disclosure statements appearing on Facebook. The key expectation was that the voluntary disclosure claims, being more proactive, would lead to greater organizational transparency perceptions and also significant changes in credibility perceptions as compared to either the responsive or the obligatory disclosure claims based on prior literature on stealing thunder and transparency.

In the results, when the participants read a company's self-disclosure statement claiming it as freely given information to public, they were more likely to project greater transparency perceptions toward that company than when they viewed its disclosure statement including responsive claims (i.e., a response to a journalist) or the obligatory claims (i.e., compliance with government agencies). In the similar vein, the three types of proactive disclosure claims influenced participants' credibility perceptions toward a given organization. Specifically, voluntary, self-disclosure statements led to significantly greater credibility perceptions of corporations than both the responsive and obligatory claims.

From a theoretical point of view, these findings were consistent with prior stealing thunder and disclosure effects literature, which indicated a known impact of a self-disclosure strategy on participants' perceived credibility toward a communicator (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos Ewoldsen, 2005; Kim, Hong, & Cameron, 2011b). This study also extended the stealing thunder literature by examining the role of three types of disclosure statements claimed by an organization in the self-disclosure effects for corporate issues and threats. Specifically, this study used a corporate online statement as the format for the self-disclosure message, and exposed this to the participants via the corporate Facebook page.

As noted in the literature review, previous studies used a newspaper article as the venue carrying the disclosing strategy to see the role of stealing thunder on audience perceptions of an organization as the stated source using that strategy (i.e., "Pepsico officials announced at a press conference today/A report from the Midwestern regional office of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) indicates that a new preservative used in Pepsi might be making consumers sick," Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 429). That is, an organization's revelation about a crisis as a journalist's stated source appearing in a news article would be more effective at enhancing credibility ratings of quoted organization officials than the opposite condition in which another party reporting the problem first is used as a source. In doing so, scholars examined the impact of stealing thunder on journalists as the message recipient (Arpan & Pompper, 2003) or on students as the participants (Arpan & Rokskos-Ewoldsen, 2005).

However, the present study specifically examined the role of an organization's disclosure claims appeared on its official social media site and found the similar results, supporting the impact of corporate disclosure statements regarding the unfolding of its own threats even when the information was released by them. The question of the present study was also whether the revelation of an issue via corporations' official statements would actually affect adults as a lay public, too. According to the descriptive, demographic data, the participants in this study could reflect a lay public and an appropriate sample in terms of their active use of Facebook.

On the other hands, Claeys and Cauberghe (2012) addressed the need to use real organizations from different industrial sectors to further the stealing thunder research. With respect to this concern, the present study used three real organizations from different industrial categories (e.g., fashion/sports, food, and electronic), and indicated that the effects of organizations' self-disclosure claims of threats were still significant to enhance the organizations' perceived credibility and also transparency.

No Differences between the Responsive Disclosure and the Obligatory Disclosure

Meanwhile, it should be noted that the difference between the responsive and the obligatory claims was not found for every dependent variable. That is, when reading a corporate disclosure statement in response to a journalist, the participants' organizational transparency and credibility perceptions were not statistically different from when they viewed the disclosure claims in compliance with government agencies. This finding is noteworthy, in that the participants might focus one either being voluntarily disclosed or being forced to do so, while disregarding which party the organization were responding to.

One possible explanation comes from the previous study of Menon and colleagues (Menon, Jewell, & Unnava, 1999). They examined changes in the consumer attitudes toward a company when exposed to four different types of the company responses to its negative publicity (e.g., strong arguments, weak arguments, no comment, and no comment due to litigation; Menon et al., 1999). The important finding of the study was that the no comment and the no comment because of the litigation conditions were not statistically different from each other in damaging the attitudes toward the company. Guided by the commodity theory (Brock, 1992), Menon and colleagues described that consumers could only respond to unavailability of information from the company, and thus, might disregard whether the company had legal reasons for doing so. It applies to the present study, in that the participants may only react to whether a company has been required to reveal the corporate issues or not, and that the forced conditions (i.e., responding to a journalist vs. responding to a government agency) may be perceived in a more or less similar way.

Future study should use other sources such as activist/consumer groups to see if public still only react to the voluntary disclosure, while treating other forced conditions in the same way. To fully investigate how publics respond to the "obligatory" disclosure message, future research might want to use the stronger manipulation of the forced condition using legal undertones instead of merely mentioning government regulatory agencies.

Impact of Disclosure Claims in Reducing the Severity Perceptions toward Given Issue

In addition to the impact of the corporate disclosure on a lay public's perceptions projected toward the stimuli company, this study examined the impact of such proactive issue disclosure on the public's severity perceptions associated with issue itself. Specifically, the participants' severity of an issue was measured as an important outcome variable posed by exposure to different disclosure claims. Notably, the present study found a significant impact of organizations' voluntary revelation of a problem on the perceived significance of the disclosed issue, but only found the difference on the public perceptions of issue severity between the voluntary disclosure claims and the obligatory ones. That is, when reading the voluntary disclosure claims posed by an organization, the participants perceived a given issue as less severe than when they were exposed to the disclosure claims complying with government agencies' requests, and the difference was statistically significant.

Conversely, prior literature indicated inconsistent findings regarding the impact of the self-disclosure of a threat on the perceived severity of the problem. That is, one study indicated that stealing thunder would not be effective in reducing perceptions of crisis severity (Arpan & Pomppere, 2003), while another argued that the stealing thunder would work better to reduce perceptions of the crisis as severe (Arpan & Rokskos-Ewoldsen, 2005). By supporting the prediction that the voluntarily divulged corporate issues and its official statements decreased perceptions of issue severity, the present study built empirical evidence to the commodity theory and the stealing thunder literature.

Based on commodity theory, scholars described the reasons why the self-disclosure strategy allows an organization to downplay its crisis severity (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Williams et al., 1993). By using that strategy, an organization can use their own terms to reduce the significance of its crisis (Williams et al., 1993), and the available information disclosed by an organization can decrease the value of the crisis, which ultimately reduce its severity perceptions (Arpan & Pompper, 2003). Regardless of the reasons, the present study bolsters the role of the voluntary disclosure in reducing issue severity perceptions.

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the same disclosure for responding to a journalist did not either downplay or augment the participants' severity perceptions of an issue compared to the other two conditions (voluntary and obligatory). As noted in H4a, H4b and H4c, when a company revealed its issue in responding to a journalist, that disclosure claim did not lead to greater or lesser severity perceptions compared to the voluntary disclosure and to the obligatory condition.

This might be due to the fact that Facebook, as the platform carrying each corporate disclosure statement, may cause different perceptions regarding the significance of given issue. For every condition, this study used the same setting such that a company was sharing information regarding an issue. However, if a company was responding to a news article claim by a journalist and offering/correcting information via its Facebook, such a disclosure might be primed as a more passive response compared to the release of the same message via a newspaper or any other traditional media. A passive response thereby leads to reporting of less significance of given issue.

Another explanation for this finding is that the participants could have higher source expertise or authority perceptions of a government entity as the stated source, which in turn, could result in greater significance of the issues disclosed. Researchers have found that because of ease of evaluating or determining source, source expertise would likely have stronger influence on persuasion than trustworthiness, dynamism, composure, sociability, liking, similarity, and other credibility dimensions (Leathers, 1992; Metzger, Flanagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003; Sundar, 1999; Wilson & Sherrell, 1993).

On the other hand, in terms of the online venue used in this study and in previous literature regarding web-based credibility, those arguments may not be relevant to this research. That is, a line of research demonstrated that 1) on the Internet, reliability, dependability, or consistency in message quality is more important for assessing web credibility (Wathen & Burkell, 2002), 2) the dimensions of social media credibility especially contain constructs of authenticity, insightfulness, consistency, fairness, focus, and popularity instead of source expertise and authority (Kang, 2010), and 3) source credibility is not as important as the content of a given message regarding a crisis when considering credibility (e.g., the image restoration strategy used; Brubaker & Haigh, 2010). This study measured corporate credibility as the outcome variable about the main speaker regarding the issue. However, as credibility toward the stated source included in the corporate disclosure was not the primary interest area of this study, it was excluded in this research.

Nevertheless, one important consideration is how corporate credibility perceptions posed by the three levels of disclosure claims interacted with the credibility perceptions toward the stated source (e.g., a journalist or a government agency) as well as the communicator delivering an official statement (e.g., a public relations spokesperson, if he or she is appeared on the message, which is not this case), and how issue severity was affected. Future research should include similar speculations in further examining the role of disclosure claims, especially if the same study will be done in the context of traditional media.

Organizational Transparency as a Single-Event Measure

Another important point is that this study added organizational transparency as an important variable for capturing the initial outcome posed by the voluntary disclosure claims, as opposed to the responsive and the obligatory ones. As discussed in the literature review, there have been apparent conflicts between the two lines of research regarding the explication of the concept of transparency, whereas there is consensus about the benefits of having transparency to increase trustworthiness of the information itself and of the communicator behind it. One line of research has contended that transparency is an ethical and normative value rooted in respectful exchange and relationships that can give an organization a favorable reputation if applied (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Jahansoozi, 2006). Specifically, they argued that transparent communication could be an outcome based on mutual understanding, involvement, and ongoing communication between an organization and its key public. On the other hand, another line of research (Kim, Hong, & Cameron, 2011a, 2011b; Rawlins, 2009, Sweetser, 2010) highlighted the instrumental definition of transparency, arguing that public trust in organizations could be maintained by practices aimed at increasing the visibility of organizations' actions.

The current study focused on transparent communication as an organization's strategic behavior of voluntarily opening information to the public to enhance its perceived transparency and, therefore, credibility. In other words, instead of focusing on organizational transparency as the outcome of the process to build a relationship between an organization and a public, this study measured the organizational transparency as the consequence of an organization's single-event behavior, information disclosure. In doing so, the present study used somewhat different measures: for measuring transparency, I adopted Rawlins' transparency scale (2009), concentrating more on organizational efforts to offer substantial information to public, increase its accountability perceived by public, and to remove secrecy. Meanwhile, the present study used the measurement of corporate credibility that may uniquely account for the concept such as sincerity, trustworthiness and honesty, followed by previous studies (Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Wood & Eagly, 1981). However, the findings of the regression analyses as well as correlation analysis revealed that the two terms might be closely related concepts. Although Rawlins constructed and validated the measurement for the transparency efforts scale by stressing out the organization's behavioral components of being transparent in eye of a public (2009), the current study argues for that the measurement of organizational transparency and credibility might be overlapped with each other, which would be a limitation for this study.

Thus, further elaboration and refinement are needed to measure organizational transparency, especially, when examining the strategic element of disclosure (e.g., an organization's self-disclosure and its influence on perceived organizational transparency prompted by the single event). Likewise, stealing thunder literature would be richer if we further address mediating factors between the self-disclosure strategy and its outcome variables (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2012). When it comes to adopting a new measurement for organizational transparency, it is important to know that 1) whether organizational transparency can become a component of perceived corporate credibility and 2) whether organizational transparency mediates the effect between an organization's voluntary disclosure claim and public behaviors related to that disclosure.

To fully understand the perceptual change occurring as a result of a corporation's self-disclosure statements, future research should use a pretest-posttest design measuring its prior-reputation of being transparent. Moreover, it would be meaningful to include publics' perceptions of information possession as a significant variable to study. That is, publics might regard the exposure to a company's voluntary disclosure claim as obtaining a plenitude of information on the corporate issue, which constitutes corporate transparency perceptions and its perceived openness in public.

No Significance for the Referral Source

Additionally, this study examined the impact of the referral source to exposure to the corporate statements on issue severity and organizational transparency perceptions, and found no significance for the referral source. Concerning the social media platform (i.e., the sharing function in Facebook and its viral effects on users; Thompson, 2012) and the liberalization of commodity theory (Brock & Brannon, 1992), the present study operationalized a friend's referral (sharing) to exposure to the disclosure claims as a potential moderator between the message recipient's scarcity perception toward a given issue and evaluations toward the content. To illustrate, a friend's referral to the corporate disclosure statement was expected to reduce the unavailability perceptions on that particular information, and thereby downplay evaluative scrutiny of more information and the significance of that content.

This study, however, found no statistically significant main effect of the referral source condition and its interactions with the disclosure claims on perceived severity of a given issue. In other words, whether the public is exposed to read given corporate statements via friends' referrals or view the same contents by chance would not matter for the participants in evaluating significance of given issues.

The unsupported effects of the referral source might be due to either a relatively low statistical power used in this study or the manipulation itself. Thus, future research might recruit sufficient participants to increase sample size, which in turn, increase power of a study. For the issue regarding manipulation, the participants correctly identified the manipulation of the referral source. However, it could not be enough to trigger the participants to regard the given person as interpersonal and close to them. In other words, the participants might have not actually perceived the manipulated referral sources as their friends, but may have merely regarded the people at an acknowledgement level. Therefore, it would be intriguing to see whether the findings would differ when using other operationalizations of the referral source condition. Future research should address this shortcoming by either using strong social cues of the referral source (e.g., pictures of the source) or creating fictitious Facebook pages allowing users to navigate and search for the source.

In terms of practical implications, one cannot say that merely revealing information in advance of others ensures the communicator's credibility. However, this study supports the value of transparent communication applied as the voluntarily disclosed corporate statement. Particularly, in the issue phase when corporate threats may not be out in the open, such a voluntary disclosure strategy considering public interests can affect greater organizational transparency, which connects to corporate credibility and favorable behaviors toward that organization. In the new media environment, people may expect greater transparency, exemplified by the increasingly participatory and open nature of information with the rise of social network sites, which one researcher calls “the growing culture of transparency” (Lankes, 2008, p. 676). Thus, this study proposes that public relations practitioners need to tailor claims to voluntarily divulge the facts while concerning public interest, if an organization acknowledges the threat with a goal of managing it. In other words, the voluntary, proactive disclosure of corporate issues may offer practitioners key ingredients for developing strong relationships with publics—transparency and credibility.

5-3. Limitations and Future Study

As with any research, this study comes with several limitations. First, in testing the impact of the disclosure claims, this study has mainly focused on organizational claims made in online statements asserting given information as voluntarily disclosed, responding to a news article, or complying with a government agency. In other words, participants learned about the corporate issue in a forced-exposure situation and were asked to evaluate the organization and the issue immediately thereafter. In reality, however, the effects of the same disclosure would likely be mitigated if the content was delivered with other sources of information such as a news article, a report from governments and activist groups, or comments of other publics. In this regard, future studies can address this speculation by examining the impact of combined exposure to different sets of information to see the interactions of those counterarguments.

Similarly, whether similar effects occur in more natural processing conditions is not clear. That is, the public might not have learned about a corporate issue until a later date. In such a case, the impact of the proactive disclosure statements would likely be reduced. Thus, future research should determine when timing of the voluntary disclosure is important and how the timing affects organizational transparency and credibility.

Using multiple scenarios within this study would have boosted confidence in the findings. Conversely, according to the pilot test results, this study adopted and manipulated identical types of corporate issues that were specifically related to public health issues. Thus, this study cannot determine whether the same effects of the disclosure claims would occur across other types of issues.

Last but not least, as noted earlier, the sample of this study was biased to have advanced degrees (e.g., 46.1 % of the participants had M.A., Ph.D., M.D., J.D., etc.), indicating that they were a highly-educated sample. In order to guarantee the representativeness of the sample, future research should use a more systematic sampling method and procedures to consider educational level and other demographic variables.

Despite these limitations, this study offers theoretical and practical insights. If a short-term advantage of using the proactive strategy is intended, this study provides empirical support for the role of proactive disclosure claims in reducing the severity of an issue assessed by the public. Corporations' voluntary revelation of its hidden issues can serve as an effective strategy in which the benefits of exposure to such disclosure are also found to increase both organizational transparency and credibility perceptions. Especially, the data bolsters the importance of being volunteered in disclosing corporate threats as opposed to being forced to reveal the same information: public viewed the corporate disclosure claims to respond to a news media and the one to comply with a government agency in a similarly negative way.

In conclusion, compared to being reactive to issues unfolding, organizations may consider the timely, proactive option, if such voluntary disclosure is regarded as an opportunity to enhance corporate credibility in the ways that that the data suggest; this is also a possibility if the threats are not severe enough to directly attack an organization's reputation or to connect to litigation issues.

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