The stakeholder-communication continuum:

An alternate approach to internal-and-external communications

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Course: MCM740, Capstone: Research for Communications

Master of Communications Management (MCM) Program

McMaster University

March 1, 2018

Abstract

The academic scholarship and professional literature to date have defined communications as existing in two groups: internal or external. Through a case-study examination of McMaster University and its alumni constituents, this paper suggests that communications (and by extension, stakeholder definition) can be viewed on a continuum. Dubbed the stakeholder-communication continuum, the proposed theory places internal and external communications on both ends of the spectrum, respectively; with stakeholder groups plotted along the continuum based on their relationship to the organization and each other. Depending on where the stakeholder group falls, communications can be internal, external, or a hybrid combination of internal/external.

Using a triangulated research method in which a broad, representative survey was sent to alumni, in-depth interviews were conducted with university staff, and a content analysis of alumni-facing communications were conducted, the researcher examined the feasibility of the proposed stakeholder-communication continuum. What resulted is the revelation that McMaster staff view and treat their alumni as a key stakeholder that has both internal and external characteristics. As a result, communications to this constituent group differ from other stakeholders in both content and style.

The paper concludes that a stakeholder-communication continuum may in fact be a plausible theory, and encourages further testing of the hypothesis.

Keywords: internal communications, external communications, two-way symmetrical communications, communications continuum, stakeholder identification, organization-public relationships, control mutuality, alumni, university

Contents

Background

Valentini, Kruckeberg, and Starck (2012) posited that globalism and technology has impelled a redefinition of publics by bypassing the boundaries of geography, status, class, culture, and religion to alter stakeholder views and interests, while allowing people the ability to wield more influence over communication mechanisms and content/product creation. In his discussion of organizational public relations, Spicer (1997) likewise hypothesized that the field's maturation will influence a growing interconnectivity between organizations and the surrounding environment, shifting the way in which communications are conceived and delivered. The implication is that there is an undeviating and important need for scholars and practitioners to periodically examine popular theories of stakeholder identification and communications, so as to ensure alignment with the most recent technological developments, global trends, and communication practices.

Spicer (2008) has written of the lack of clarity surrounding stakeholder definitions, stating that questions related to the topic "have driven stakeholder scholarship for the past 20 years" (p. 28). This is particularly true in light of the changing communication practices produced by the advent and widespread use of social media. Social media has not only altered the ways in which people can, and do, communicate with each other but the technology has also challenged our understanding of who constitutes an internal stakeholder and who an external one.

For example, organizations have been encouraged by scholars and practitioners to leverage blogs and Twitter, two social media platforms that have traditionally been geared towards external publics, as internal communication tools to help build employee engagement (Bowen & Men, 2016; Ross, 2014; Varney, 2014). Likewise, the accessibility that social media provides external publics to the dominant coalition not only allows these stakeholders the opportunity to

directly relay their feedback but could, in fact, shift the status of these people from external publics to a hybrid of internal and external publics. For instance, sports-bike manufacturer, Ducati, has asserted that it "genuinely consider its fans as part of the company" (Van Belleghem, 2012, p. 190). One of the many fan-feedback initiatives that they have instituted is their online Tech Café. Consisting of approximately 1,000 Ducati fans, the company consults with this community on research and development, product design, and product and commercial management prior to making decisions (Insites Consulting, 2012; Prandelli, Swahney, & Verona, 2008; Van Belleghem, 2012).

In her paper on the role that internal communications plays in organizational goal achievement, Chen (2017) noted a shifting perception among some Chief Executive Officers regarding the interpretation of internal communications and internal stakeholders. Specifically, the majority of organizational leaders interviewed felt there "was a certain imprecision to the assumption that there are only two classifications of stakeholders and communications, internal and external" (Chen, 2017, p. 17). Like Ducati, these leaders considered people from outside of their organizations to be full or partial internal stakeholders.

What stemmed from Chen (2017)'s paper was the suggestion that, instead of being seen as two separate groups as defined by the literature to date, internal and external communications be perceived as existing on a continuum. The continuum would consist of internal communications on one end and external communications on the other, with stakeholder groups plotted along the spectrum based on their relationship to the organization and the amount of information these stakeholders are privy to. Depending on where the stakeholders lie in relation to the organization, communications can be internal, external, or varying degrees of internal and external (see Fig. 1).
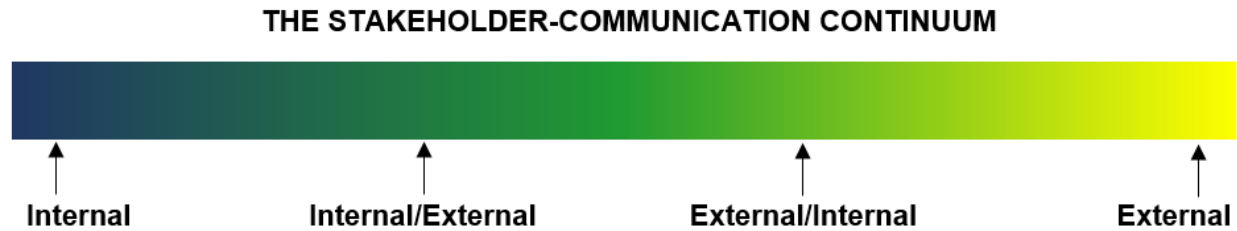
THE STAKEHOLDER-COMMUNICATION CONTINUUM

Figure 1. The stakeholder-communication continuum, as proposed by the researcher.

Research Problem

As products of educational institutions, alumni enjoy unique relationships with their alma maters. While no longer involved with their former institutions on a daily basis, these stakeholders exert a certain amount of influence through their time, monetary contributions, and/or feedback. When it comes to McMaster University (McMaster), alumni not only have their own Association Board but also a designated number of seats at key decision-making tables, such as Dean Advisory Boards, the Board of Governors, and the University Senate (McMaster University, 2018b, 2018c). A cursory examination of five similarly ranked Canadian universities found that only two other universities (Toronto and Alberta) have similar alumni representation across their Board of Governors and University Senate (University of Alberta, 2018a, 2018b; University of Toronto, 2018).

Founded in 1887, McMaster is a research-intensive, medical-doctoral Canadian university located in the province of Ontario. Consistently ranked by global university-ranking systems as one of the top 100 institutions in the world, McMaster currently boasts a total population of 31,265 students, and an alumni community of more than 184,000 members (McMaster University, 2018a). Graduates of the University are automatically enrolled in the McMaster Alumni Association, a constituent body governed by an executive board of 11 alumni representatives (McMaster University, 2018b). One of the primary functions of the Association

is to help the University fulfill its three mandates of research, teaching, and community service through their advocacy, fundraising support, and participation in governance (McMaster University, 2018c).

The researcher intends to use a case study examination of McMaster, and the University's communications and relationships with its alumni to compare existing scholarly literature against a possible stakeholder-communication continuum. Given the roles and tasks entrusted to McMaster alumni, this paper will seek to determine if they can be considered internal/external stakeholders of the University. Communications and relationships with this constituent body will further be explored to determine the plausibility of the researcher's hypothesized continuum.

Research Questions

The researcher aims to test the validity of her stakeholder-communication continuum through the utilization of three overarching research questions.

RQ1: How and to what extent does the University view and treat alumni differently than other external stakeholders?

While it has already been established that alumni have designated seats at key decision-making tables, this question aims to further explore the ways in which McMaster interacts with, and perceives, their alumni population. Specifically, how do University staff commonly refer to alumni and what role(s) do they believe this constituent plays within the Institution? In what ways does McMaster engage with alumni stakeholders differently, if at all? Are alumni entrusted with more information? When compared to other stakeholders, do alumni have more influence over the University's decisions and actions?

RQ2: How and to what extent do University communications to alumni differ from communications to other external stakeholders?

This question endeavours to discover if McMaster communicates differently with their alumni population versus other stakeholders. For example, are there alumni-specific publications or communication channels? If so, what are they and what kind of content do they feature? Are communications customized to an alumni audience and, if so, what kind of changes are made? In the same vein, are there specific words or phrases that are used more frequently with alumni? Finally, is the University more inclined to practice two-way, symmetrical communications with their alumni constituents?

RQ3: How and to what extent do University communications affect alumni relationships?

This question intends to understand the impact McMaster's communications have on their alumni. Do alumni consider themselves important stakeholders of the University, and is that sentiment reflected in their investment and relationship with the Institution? Do they feel that McMaster cares about their opinions, and that they are able to influence the actions of their alma mater? How can University communications alter alumni engagement and relationships moving forward?

Literature Review

Organization-Public Relationships

Defined as "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62), an organization-public relationship is one in which assets, actions, and stances are influenced by a mutual interconnecting interest that links the concerned parties (Hung, 2008; Smith, 2012). This common interest does not need to be

acknowledged by those involved, so long as a "system of mutuality" is practiced among the stakeholders (Smith, 2012, p. 842). Smith (2012) posited that this interdependent relationship, be it "proactive or reactive, intentional or unintentional," is what differentiates the field of public relations from marketing (p. 841).

Building on Mills and Clark's assertion of organization-public relationships being communal or exchange by nature, with the former meaning freely supplying and the latter defined as transactional giving, Hung (2002) identified six types of organization-public relationships: exploitive, manipulative, symbiotic, contractual, covenantal, and mutual communal. Grunig (as cited by Hung, 2005) expanded upon and adjusted Hung's theory, placing the relationship styles of exploitative, contractual, exchange, covenantal, and communal along a continuum, where exploitative relationships represent the most concern for one's self and communal relationships represent the most concern for others. Grunig's continuum was adopted and further modified by Hung (2005) who included the additional relationship types of symbiotic and manipulative before and after contractual relationships, respectively, and split communal relationships into the categories of mutual and one-sided (Hung, 2008). Of the two types of communal relationships, one-sided ones were considered to be the most concerned for others' interests (Hung, 2008). Hung (2008) posited that exchange, covenantal, and mutual communal relationships were the most effective for organizations and publics, as they represent "win-win" relationships (p. 458).

Hon and Grunig (1999) were among the first to suggest that organization-public relationships be evaluated for effectiveness, arguing that this would help demonstrate the value of public relations. They proposed the six relational outcomes of control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationships, and mutual relationships as potential categories of

measurement (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Huang (2001) further refined these measurement factors by replacing the elements of exchange and mutual relationships with face and favour, two qualities important in Asian relationships. More recently, Jo (2006) elaborated on Huang's 2001 definition by including personal networks as an additional outcome.

The measurement and cultivation of organization-public relationships can allow stakeholders to improve intangible assets, such as the relational outcomes identified by the scholars above, while helping to contribute to the formation and management of strategy. Specifically, organization-public relationships can allow for better environmental scanning (Men & Hung, 2009), more informed decision making (Hon & Grunig, 1999), and increased loyalty and support from stakeholders on strategic initiatives (Men & Hung, 2009).

Control Mutuality

While scholars have agreed that control mutuality is an important factor and outcome of relationships, definitions for the actual term have varied. Hon and Grunig (1999) defined control mutuality as an agreement between two parties, who both wield a certain (though not necessarily equal) amount of power over the other, on the "rightful" degree of influence exercised by each stakeholder (p. 19). Stafford and Canary (1991), on the other hand, asserted that control mutuality is "the degree to which parties agree about which of them should decide relational goals and behaviours" (p. 224). Other scholars have contended that control mutuality equates to satisfaction regarding the shared power exercised by relevant parties (Gallicano & Heisler, 2011; Palenchar & Heath, 2006). The message that has remained consistent across these definitions is that control mutuality requires consensus between stakeholders who are in an interdependent relationship with each other.

In order for control mutuality to be present in stakeholder relationships, a few conditions

need to be met. First, parties must endeavour to assure the other of their sincerity, so as to ensure

one side does not "exploit the other" (Hung, 2008, p. 464). Next, trust, itself a relational factor

and outcome, is essential for control mutuality, as "relationship outcomes are undermined if at

least some degree of trust is not present" (Bowen & Gallicano, 2013, p. 195). Finally, the

organization must have a participatory culture that fosters two-way, symmetrical

communications between parties (Garvey & Buckley, 2010; Gurabardhi, Gutteling, &

Kuttschreuter, 2005; Hung, 2008).

It is important for stakeholders to use two-way, symmetrical communications, as it indicates

a lack of desire by the parties to control one another, instead relying on the efficiency of

communication programs to achieve goals and objectives (Murphy, 2008). The use of two-way,

symmetrical communications also enhances control mutuality in a number of ways, including

allowing stakeholders to improve relationships (Bowen & Sisson, 2015), explore growth

opportunities (Huang, 2001), resolve issues (Huang, 2001), and encourage ongoing cooperation

(Fisson, 2017). In other words, reciprocal communications are essential to the effective practice

of control mutuality, which in turn leads to steady and favourable relationships.

Two-Way, Symmetrical Communications and the Mixed-Motive Model

The concept behind two-way, symmetrical communications is that reciprocal discourse

promotes mutual respect and understanding, resolves conflicts, and changes existing attitudes

and stances (Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). A "classic" communications model (Bowen,

2008, p. 285), two-way, symmetrical communications is often considered the normative system

for public relations and communications excellence (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Dialogue is not

only essential for the management of stakeholder needs and interests (Heath, 2008), but also

necessary for environmental scanning and stakeholder buy-in (Heath, 2008; Stacks & Watson, 2008). Hagan (2008) further espoused that the transparency and candor of two-way communications is the means to achieving short- and long-term organizational goals.

Practitioners and theorists who criticize two-way, symmetrical communications argue that the model is idealistic and not an accurate reflection of actual practices. Miller and Van der Meiden (as cited by Grunig, 2001) posited that communications in public relations is inherently asymmetrical because the balance of power is typically tipped towards organizations, providing organizational stakeholders with little incentive to accede to the interests or desires of others. Grunig countered that, insofar as people typically "get more of what they want when they give up some of what they want" (Grunig, 2001, pg. 13), organizations would still have reason to liaise with their publics. Scott (2008) supported Grunig's assertion, stating that stronger relationships are more likely to be built when parties relinquish control. Grunig and other scholars additionally pointed out that it is dangerous to assume that the weaker party is the publics, as dissatisfied publics can augment their power through the formation of activist groups and media campaigns (Grunig, 2001; McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2013). This is particularly true in today's digital age where social media can accelerate and amplify messages.

As a response to some of these concerns, Grunig proposed a revised communications model. Deriving from Murphy (1991)'s game-theory continuum, which introduces the concept of a mixed-motive game, Grunig suggested a mixed-motive model of communication (see Fig. 2), in which asymmetrical and symmetrical communications exist along a continuum (Moncur, 2006; Plowman, 2008; Spicer, 2008). Though having their own self-interests, stakeholders on both sides practice cooperation and symmetrical communications in order to reach a common middle ground, typically known as the win-win zone, on issues, benefits, and/or decisions

(Grunig, 2001; Hagan, 2008; Plowman, 2008). In addition to being "an ideal combination of normative and positive theory" (Grunig, 2001, p. 26), the mixed-motive model contributes to relationship maintenance through the balancing of "short-term tactical advantages" (achieved through asymmetrical practices) and "long-term, strategy" (achieved though symmetrical practices) (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995, p. 216). Finally, the mixed-motive model can also serve as a possible evaluation tool, allowing communicators to measure their success through their ability to reach the win-win zone (Grunig, 2001; Moncur, 2006).
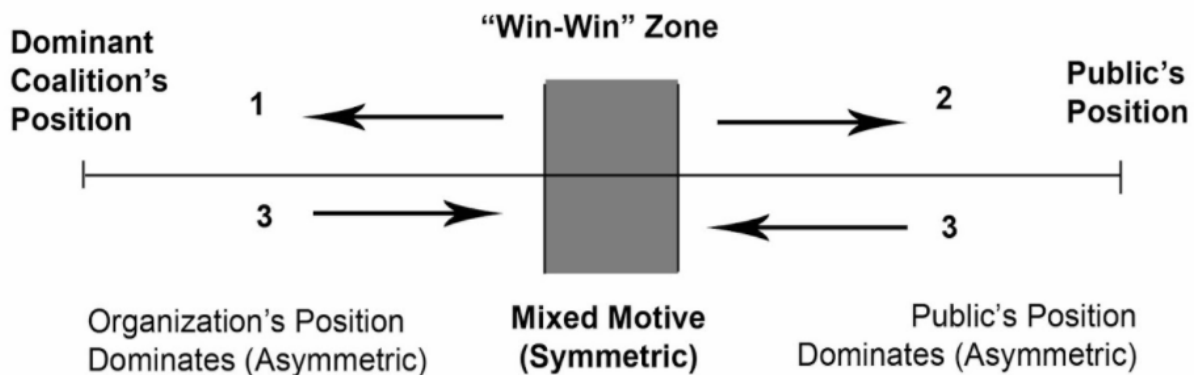

Figure 2. Grunig's mixed-motive communication model. Source: Grunig (2001).

Internal Communications

Through its linkages to human resources and organizational structure, internal communications has generally been defined as correspondence to individuals and groups within an organization, typically employees (Bowen & Men, 2017; Ćorić & Vokic, 2009; Hon, 2008; Gregory, Invernizzi, & Romenti, 2013). Initially disseminated as a form of public information via one-way communication channels (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), internal communications is now believed to be best served using two-way, symmetrical communications (Theaker, 2004). There are a few reasons behind this development. First, thoughts regarding internal communications' purpose has shifted. From a form of employee entertainment in the 1940s to a tool for

information and persuasion in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively, internal communications has only been regarded as a mechanism for open communications since the 1980s (Theaker, 2004). Next, external factors such as globalization, deregulation, and economic crises have threatened the stability of organizations and reduced employee trust (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012). Finally, there is a growing need for employers to nurture the emotional investment of their employees as their attachment and loyalty to their places of employment decrease (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012).

Organizational structure and internal communication systems act as antecedents to employee-organization relationships (Hung, 2008). However, the incorporation of internal communications in an organization's structure has varied, with internal communicators reporting to human resources, corporate communications, public relations, marketing, or even the CEO (Ćorić & Vokic, 2009). Berger (2008) posited that there exists three levels of internal communications (interpersonal, group, and organizational), and that technological developments, such as social media, have altered the way in which communications have traditionally been executed. For example, corporate social media channels, such as Yammer, potentially provide front-line staff with direct access to the dominant coalition, effectively bypassing their managers and causing dialogue to be transmitted diagonally instead of vertically (Berger, 2008).

Bowen (2008) asserted that effective internal communications in a supportive and participative culture will contribute to organizational success. Specifically, internal communications can help organizations achieve three primary objectives: a) ensuring that internal stakeholders understand and accept disseminated messages, b) gaining employee buy-in on company-wide decisions and initiatives, and c) achieving business improvements, such as increased sales or better product quality (Spitzer & Swidler, 2003).

Internal communications helps an organization in both qualitative and quantitative ways. Qualitatively, better communications increase employee loyalty and satisfaction (Berger, 2008; Hon, 2008; Kim & Ni, 2013), cultivate an inclusive organizational culture (Verčič & Verčič, 2013; Gregory, Invernizzi, & Romenti, 2013), and build stronger organizational relationships (Ströh, 2008). Quantitatively, meaningful internal communications help improve an organization's bottom line. Specifically, internal communications can potentially increase employee productivity (Ströh, 2008), promote innovation (Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), and espouse organizational effectiveness (Kim & Ni, 2013). It is also thought to be able to decrease costs associated to negative publicity (Grunig, 1992), employee absenteeism (Clampitt & Downs, 1993), and litigation (Grunig, 1992).

Better communications also allow for the leveraging of employee knowledge. Specifically, internal stakeholders can contribute to boundary spanning by volunteering strategic information and alerting senior management to potential risks or threats (Kim & Ni, 2013). Employees will also be more willing to act as brand ambassadors (Kim & Ni, 2013; Sriramesh, Rhee, & Sung, 2013), promoting the organization during times of prosperity and defending the organization to friends, family, and other external stakeholders during times of trouble (Bowen & Gallicano, 2013; Kim & Ni, 2013).

Kalla (2005) asserted that internal communications has to be integrated, multidisciplinary, and multilevel, with practical and theoretical knowledge appropriated from business, management, corporate, and organizational communications. This integration does come with the implication that the dominant coalition invest in, and pay equal amounts of attention to, internal and external stakeholders (Ćorić & Vokic, 2009). Through their ability to

lead by example, the dominant collation is ultimately responsible for driving internal

communications within organizations (Bowen, 2008; Li, 2015).

External Communications

More commonly known as public relations, external communications has often found

itself the subject of debates regarding its identity and role within society (Kotler & Mindak,

1978). For many, public relations is thought of as a media-relations and external-

communications function (Benn, Todd, & Pendleton, 2010), that concentrates largely on "one-

way advocacy for specific private interests" (Cheney & Christensen, 2006, p.100). Journalists

have derogatively referred to public relations' efforts as "spin" (Macnamara, 2016, p. 119) and

many people, including some academics and practitioners, view public relations in a negative

light (Cheney & Christensen, 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Duffy, 2000). Further

compounding this issue is the fact that there has not been agreement within the public relations

community as to how they want to be defined (Cheney & Christensen, 2006; Duffy, 2000;

Hutton, 1999). This sentiment is perhaps captured most eloquently by Hutton (1999) who wrote:

> [P]ublic relations has evolved from "the public be fooled" to "the public be damned" to
>
> "the public be manipulated" to "the public be informed" to "the public be involved or
>
> accommodated." Unfortunately, however, nothing even close to a consensus has emerged
>
> from all these definitions. (p. 201)

According to Edward L. Bernays, a pioneer of modern public relations, the function

serves three main objectives: "a) informing people, b) persuading people, and c) integrating

people with people" (Kotler & Mindak, 1978, p. 16). Though George Westinghouse of

Westinghouse Electric Corporation is credited with the formal establishment of the public

relations field, some scholars believe public relations existed in ancient civilizations, citing the

use of propaganda by leaders to control society (Kotler & Mindak, 1978). Throughout time, public relations has largely been thought of as a "defensive" profession (Cheney & Christensen, 2006, p. 100), in which communications is disseminated using one-way, press agentry/publicity and only advocates for the organization or public figure it represents (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

As public relations departments have developed within organizations, questions surrounding the method by which the function can best communicate with audiences have arisen. Grunig and Hunt (1984) were among the first to advocate for the use of two-way, symmetrical communications in public relations, arguing that mutual understanding allows for better negotiation, persuasion, and collaboration. Seitel (1998) supported Grunig and Hunt's assertion, albeit for a different reason, stating that the only way to influence an increasingly savvy audience is to be truthful and transparent with them. This particularly seems to hold true in present society where social media has facilitated communication pathways, allowing for the direct transmission of information between employees and external publics (Duhé & Wright, 2013).

There have also been changing perceptions as to how the public relations function should be structured within an organization, particularly when a marketing function is also present. Organizations typically utilize one of five relationship models for marketing and public relations: a) marketing and public relations are separate but equal functions, b) marketing and public relations are equal but have overlapping functions, c) public relations is subsumed within a dominant marketing function, d) marketing is subsumed within a dominant public relations function, and e) public relations and marketing are the same function (Kotler & Mindak, 1987). Kotler and Mindak (1987) posited that the division between marketing and public relations is steadily crumbling, precipitating possible power struggles for the attention and funding of the dominant coalition.

Public relations' role within the organization and society has also arisen as a point of discussion. Stacks and Watson (2008) referred to public relations as being the "management of credibility" (p. 68). This thought is supported by the Canadian Public Relations Society (2018), who adopted Flynn, Gregory, and Valin's 2008 definition of public relations, which states that "public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals, and serve the public interest" (para. 5). From its management of long-term stakeholder relationships, public relations potentially has the ability to gather and parse key insights that can aid in the achievement of organizational goals. This is one of the reasons why James Grunig advocated for the inclusion of public relations in senior-level strategic planning-and-management exercises (de Bussy, 2013).

In a study for the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), Grunig and his colleagues were able to identify a central theory of public relations through their examination of the function's role within business organizations (Grunig, 2013). Their research, known as the IABC Excellence Study for its identification of superior public relations and communications practices within organizations, not only fleshes out the reasons why the function should be at decision-making tables but also serves as a normative benchmark for most public relations scholars and practitioners (de Bussy, 2013; Likely & Watson, 2013; Toth, 2008).

The study highlighted the financial, reputational, and organizational benefits of giving the public relations function access to the dominant coalition. From a financial perspective, Grunig and his colleagues contended that public relations' stakeholder relationships have led to reduced litigation and loss of revenue through negative publicity (Likely & Watson, 2013). The function's ability to boundary scan has also led to increased revenue through the provision of

innovative and/or refreshed products and services (de Bussy, 2013; Grunig, 1992; Likely & Watson, 2013). From a reputational perspective, the public relations function preserves the organization's standing by influencing stakeholder perceptions and communicating in a symmetrical fashion (Adler & Kranowitz, 2005; Coombs, 2015). Finally, public relations is able to contribute to the development of organizational goals and decisions through its identification of potentially contentious issues (de Bussy, 2013; Likely & Watson, 2013).

Despite these benefits, the majority of public relations practitioners are still a fair distance away from their goal of being included in dominant-coalition decision making. A number of organizations remain unreceptive to the idea, choosing to view these professionals as only "communication specialists" (Kotler & Mindak, 1987, p. 20). A president of a Fortune 500 food company summarized his feelings as follows:

> I don't expect counsel from my public relations department about public issues or the stand my company should take about these issues. I consult issues 'experts' in product safety, government, and other areas. I then go to public relations to help effectively communicate our position to mass and selective audiences. I don't think public relations people have had the training or knowledge to give advice on 'issue positions.' (Kotler & Mindak, 1987, p. 20)

To overcome the perception of public relations as a propaganda tool used to "reinforce" an employer's power, image, and/or messages (Toth, 2006, p.111), public relations scholarship needs to be better cultivated (Smith, 2012; Toth, 2006). Scholars believe that increased scholarship can not only help emphasize the concept of public relations as a "relationship-building enterprise" (Toth, 2006, p. 110), but also provide public relations practitioners with the

theoretical backing needed to support professional decisions, experiences, and practices (Toth, 2006; Watts, 2006).

Research Methods

The researcher has chosen to use a single-case case study to frame her research in order to gain contextual understanding from a real-world scenario (Yin, 2014). As part of the case study inquiry, the researcher will be utilizing a triangulated research methodology that addresses both qualitative and quantitative measurements (Yin, 2014): a survey to McMaster alumni, interviews with University staff, and a content analysis of alumni-facing communications.

Alumni survey

The survey divided 26 questions into three sections: qualifying questions, current relationship with the University, and desired relationship with the University (see Appendix A). The survey consisted of 11 Likert-scale questions, nine multiple-choice (both single and multiple-answer) questions, five yes/no questions, and one open-ended question. Respondents could also provide a different answer than what was listed in six of the nine multiple-choice questions. Plain language was used throughout the survey to reduce the chances of text misinterpretation (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

Staff interviews

The in-depth interview consisted of seven questions (see Appendix B). The first one aimed to understand the respondent's role and responsibilities within McMaster, while the remaining six examined the interviewee's thoughts and opinions on the University's communications and relationships with alumni. Questions were also formulated using plain English to avoid possible misunderstandings (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

Content analysis

With the exception of the alumni website, which was examined in real time (in this case, February 2018), the researcher chose to analyze McMaster's print, digital, and social media communications over the last calendar year (January 1, 2017 to December 31, 2017). Both manifest and latent content analyses were utilized within the study (Stacks, 2011). Communications were scrutinized in three ways: First, there was a latent content analysis, in which communications were grouped into one of nine sections based on topic: direct messages, staff-related articles, faculty-related articles, alumni-related articles, student-related articles, research, event-related articles, campus-related articles, and university-wide achievements. Next, there was another latent content analysis, in which the same communications were determined to be partial or impartial in tone. Finally, communications that were identified as being direct messages were given a manifest content analysis for commonly used terminology.

Data Collection

Alumni survey

As McMaster boasts over 184,000 alumni (McMaster, 2018a), a probability sample survey was used (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). The researcher's survey was hosted on the LimeSurvey platform, and a link to the survey was sent by email to a randomized list of 15,000 alumni by McMaster University's Alumni Advancement team on behalf of the researcher. While 404 respondents (2.7%) began the survey, only 204 of the 404 (50.5%) completed the survey. Survey responses were systematically charted and objectively analyzed, with specific inferences drawn from the data collected (Stacks, 2011).

Staff interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with McMaster employees who hold either a leadership position (defined as a Manager, Director, or Vice-President) and/or work in the Communications or Alumni Advancement departments. Of the 12 people interviewed, six were in Alumni Advancement, five were in Communications, and one handled both Alumni Advancement and Communications. Two of the 12 employees opted to conduct their interview together and while their answers aligned, the possibility of influence cannot be discounted, especially since one had more seniority than the other. The researcher recruited respondents by email and conducted the interviews in person. Insofar as the researcher is an employee of the DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University, she was careful not to interview anyone who works in direct collaboration with her.

Content analysis

Analysis was conducted on 11 alumni-facing items: five print magazines, four social media platforms (two Facebook pages, one Twitter account, and one Instagram account), one blog, and one website. A total of 940 posts and articles were examined. Items that were not authored by the account holder (such as retweets on Twitter) were not analyzed. The Alumni Advancement department was responsible for most of the communications, save for four of the print magazines, one of the Facebook pages, and the blog. Of these six pieces, the Engineering and Health Sciences departments were responsible for two magazines each, the Alumni Association in Hong Kong ran the second Facebook page, and the School of Business maintained the blog. Finally, user reactions to social media posts were recorded to determine which items resonated best with viewers.

Data Analysis/Results

Alumni survey

1.1 Qualifying questions

The first three questions of this section aimed to understand the respondent profile. The

results indicated that close to a quarter (24.51%, n=50) of the respondents graduated within the

years, 2005 to 2014. Alumni who had graduated within 1985 to 1994 made up the second largest

group of respondents (18.14%, n=37), with graduates after 2015 following close behind

(17.65%, n=36). Interestingly enough, one person (0.49%) stated that the question was not

applicable to them. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of all respondents by graduating year:

Table 1

Q1: What year did you graduate from McMaster University?, n=204

Graduating year	n	%
Before 1954	2	0.98
1955 – 1964	7	3.43
1965 – 1974	17	8.33
1975 – 1984	28	13.73
1985 – 1994	37	18.14
1995 – 2004	26	12.75
2005 – 2014	50	24.51
After 2015	36	17.65
Not applicable	1	0.49

The majority of respondents (68.63%, n=140) graduated with a bachelor degree from

McMaster. After which, respondents were comprised of master's graduates (20.59%, n=42),

doctoral graduates (3.43%, n=7), post-doctoral graduates (2.45%, n=5), diploma holders (2.45%,

n=5), and double-degree holders (2.45%, n=5). Alumni who had studied in the Sciences

comprised close to half of all respondents (40.69%, n=83), with Arts graduates following closely

behind (32.35%, n=66). Business and Engineering graduates rounded out the survey with 31

(15.2%) and 24 (11.76%) respondents, respectively.

The next four questions aimed to understand McMaster's alumni-facing

communications. With the exception of eight respondents (3.92%) who claimed they had not or

did not know if they have received communications from McMaster post-graduation, the vast

majority of respondents (96.08%, n=168) indicated that the University has reached out to them.

Respondents were asked to identify the format of McMaster's communications. Emails were the

most common form of outreach (72.82%, n=142), followed by alumni magazines (58.97%,

n=115). A full list is in Table 2, below:

Table 2

Q5: If you answered 'Yes' to question #4, what types of communication have you
received? (Select all that apply), n=204

Communication types	Responses M	%
Emails	142	72.82
Alumni magazines	115	58.97
Alumni newsletters	80	41.03
Letters	74	37.95
Surveys	63	32.31
All of the above	77	39.49
Other: Phone calls	18	24.51
Other: Events	2	17.65
Don't know	1	0.49

Note. Figures represented are mean scores.

When it comes to the frequency of communications, most alumni stated that McMaster

communicates with them a few times a month (37.95%, n=74). The next three-most popular

responses included once a week (25.64%, n=52), a few times a year (22.05%, n=43), and once a

month (7.69%, n=15). Five (2.56%) people said they did not know how many times McMaster

communicated with them, two (1.03%) people said the University communicates with them less

than once a year, two (1.03%) people said McMaster communicates with them a few times a

week, and one (0.51%) person said the question was not applicable to them.

When it comes to content, alumni perceived donation requests (64.1%, n=125) and event

information (63.59%, n=124) as the most dominant communication topics. Table 3 provides full

details regarding communication content, below:

Table 3

*Q7: If you answered 'Yes' to question #4, what type of information do you recall the
University communicating to you about? (Select all that apply), n=204*

Communication content	Responses M	%
Donation requests	125	64.10
Alumni networking and social events, including reunions	124	63.59
Staff, student, and/or alumni achievements	117	60.00
University updates	115	58.97
University plans/campaigns	102	52.31
Staff, student, and/or alumni profiles	92	47.18
Information sessions with noted speakers	77	39.49
Personal and/or professional development workshops	71	36.41
Volunteer requests	28	14.36
All of the above	57	29.23
Don't know	2	1.03
Other: Insurance, credit cards, and other products	1	0.51

Note. Figures represented are mean scores.

The remaining four questions centered on alumni engagement. When asked to rate their

engagement with the University, over half (52.94%, n=108) of the respondents considered

themselves slightly engaged, 48 (23.53%) respondents said they were not at all engaged, 31

(15.20%) felt they were moderately engaged, 12 (5.88%) stated that they were very engaged, and

three (1.47%) people considered themselves extremely engaged. Finally, two (0.98%) people

said this question was not applicable to them.

What is interesting is that over half of the respondents said that they have visited the

alumni website in the past (57.84%, n=118), and that they have made contact with the University

post-graduation (53.92%, n=110). However, respondents have not felt inclined to volunteer at, or

donate money to, McMaster. Approximately half (49.51%, n=101) of the respondents said they

have not donated money to the University, while over three-quarters (84.31%, n=172) of the

respondents said they have not volunteered at McMaster. These results may explain why the

majority of alumni do not consider themselves to be engaged with the University, despite having

had contact with McMaster post-graduation.

1.2 Current relationship with the University

Questions in this section consisted of Likert scales where alumni were asked to rate their

agreement to statements. The first four questions measured alumni perceptions of University

communications. Alumni were largely satisfied with communications, selecting "agree" or

"strongly agree" on the following four questions: a) I find the University's communications to be

effective (67.16%, n=137), b) I am interested in the information that the University currently

sends (54.9%, n=112), c) I am satisfied with the frequency of the University's communications

to me (59.81%, n=122), and d) I believe the University currently engages well with me (54.9%,

n=112). While approximately a quarter (23.04%~29.90%, n=47~61) of the respondents selected

"neither agree nor disagree," very few alumni chose "disagree" or "strongly disagree."

The next four questions examined the control mutuality of the alumni-university

relationship. The first two questions asked alumni to rate their perceived influence over

McMaster, and results from this section varied. While most alumni "agreed" or "strongly

agreed" that the University is, or would be, receptive to their opinions (40.68%, n=83), they also

"disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that they do, or would, have influence over the Institution's

activities or plans (48.53%, n=99). Table 4 illustrates the full results:

Table 4

Q17: I believe the University is, or would be, receptive to my opinions
Q18: I believe I do, or would, have influence over the University's future activities and plans,
n=204

Scale	Q17		Q18	
	n	%	n	%
Strongly agree	16	7.84	5	2.45
Agree	67	32.84	21	10.29
Neither agree nor disagree	60	29.41	57	27.94
Disagree	24	11.76	66	32.35
Strongly disagree	9	4.41	33	16.18
Don't know	25	12.25	21	10.29
Not applicable	3	1.47	1	0.49

The next two questions asked alumni respondents to describe their relationship to

McMaster. Responses for these two questions were largely positive, with 36.76% (n=75) and

50.8% (n=104) of alumni agreeing or strongly agreeing that they considered themselves

important stakeholders and that they felt invested in the University, respectively. Considering the

minimal engagement respondents said they have with their Alma mater, the results are

particularly of note (see Table 5):

Table 5

Q19: As an alumnus/alumna, I still consider myself to be an important stakeholder at the University
Q20: As an alumnus/alumna, I feel invested in the University, n=204

Scale	Q19		Q20	
	n	%	n	%
Strongly agree	16	7.84	22	10.78
Agree	59	28.92	82	40.2
Neither agree nor disagree	53	25.98	48	23.53
Disagree	49	24.02	36	17.65
Strongly disagree	19	9.31	13	6.37
Don't know	7	3.43	2	0.98
Not applicable	1	0.49	1	0.49

The final three questions aimed to determine if increased or more frequent communications would inspire changed behaviours. In all three instances, more than half (64.71%~76.96%, n=132~157) of all alumni surveyed "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with the suggestion that adjusted communications could alter their stances toward engagement, volunteering, and donating.

1.3 Desired relationship with the University

This section asked alumni to describe their ideal communication style. Alumni largely agreed that email communications should be the primary form of contact (83.82% n=171), and that all other types of communications should be reduced. When it came to frequency, respondents indicated that they would prefer fewer communications, with one-third (33.33%, n=68) saying they would only like to receive communications a few times a year. Other popular frequencies were, in descending order, once a month (29.9%, n=51), a few times a month (22.06%, n=45), and once a week (6.86%, n=14). Additionally, a very small number of alumni (5.39%, n=11) stated that they would like to be communicated with once a year or not at all.

Alumni were also given the opportunity to provide feedback on what McMaster could do to make them feel more engaged, via an open-ended question. Only one-third (33.33%, n=68) of respondents deigned to answer the question. Of the 68 people that left a response, approximately one-quarter (26.47%, n=18) indicated that they were happy with the communications and relationship with McMaster to date. One-third (33.82%, n=23) of the respondents said they would engage more frequently if there were more opportunities that catered to their needs, affinities, and/or situations. Some ways in which they suggested McMaster accomplish this feat include hosting events and providing volunteer opportunities outside of the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area, organizing online professional-development workshops, and being more consistent with feedback mechanisms (such as annual alumni panels).

Approximately one-fifth (23.53%, n=16) of the respondents stressed the need for communications to be less frequent but more "personalized" and "meaningful." Specifically, alumni desired communications that were relevant to their undergraduate degrees, featured their former classmates, and/or showed the impact of their donations. The remaining respondents (16.18%, n=11) said they were unsure and/or felt that there was nothing McMaster could do to improve their engagement with the University.

Staff interviews

Q1: What is your role and responsibility when it comes to alumni communications?

Of the 12 people interviewed, five work directly with alumni and seven oversee staff who are responsible for alumni activities. Exactly half of the respondents saw their role as being that of a technician, responsible for maintaining and creating communications with alumni and/or organizing alumni events. The other six respondents described themselves as relationship builders, responsible for developing and maintaining alumni engagement.

There was consensus among three respondents that alumni relationships run much deeper than mere contact with alumni. One respondent saw himself as being responsible for anything that may "touch or influence" the alumni relationship, while another respondent told me she is responsible for creating a university culture where all employees will share a goal of keeping alumni "engaged in a lifelong relationship with McMaster." As one of the respondents stated, "alumni engagement is one of the threads that runs across everything we do…very often alumni can be our employers, they can be donors."

Q2: How do you view alumni in relation to the Institution?

With the exception of one respondent who declined answering this question, stating that the diversity of the alumni population makes it difficult for him to "pigeon hole" them, everyone else used the terms, "key stakeholder," "ambassador," and "advocate" to describe alumni. One respondent referred to alumni as the "largest constituent group" on campus, while another called alumni an "extension of the [McMaster] family."

Three respondents saw alumni as being the "embodiment" of everything the University represents, particularly since they are the people who have already "bought into" the McMaster "product" and "done their time." Three of the respondents felt alumni play a significant reputational role by helping to "keep [the University] honest" and acting as "earned media." One of these three respondents even said bluntly that alumni can "make or break" McMaster's reputation. Four other respondents called alumni "contributors," highlighting the University's dependence on the group to volunteer, mentor, donate, and support the Institution. Two of the respondents also referred to alumni as influencers, citing their roles in University governance and their occasional involvement as full- or part-time faculty members.

Q3: Do you specialize messaging and/or communications to alumni? In what ways do you adjust messaging and/or communications?

While one person opted not to answer the question due to lack of knowledge, there were varying interpretations of this question by the other respondents. Three respondents interpreted this question as the differentiation of communications to the alumni population compared to other stakeholders, while the remaining eight interviewees understood this question to mean the customization of alumni communications. When it comes to the former, the three respondents agreed that communications are "subtly tailored" for an alumni audience. Aside from choosing topics that would better resonate with alumni, communications are also created with the underlying assumption that the reader better understands and is "more interested" in McMaster. As one respondent put it, articles are "written in the sense of it being, 'here you go, Mac grad, read about something really cool that is happening here. It's your Alma mater.'" Additionally, alumni names and their years of graduation are bolded in some publications.

The remaining eight respondents who interpreted the question differently agreed that alumni audiences are typically segmented by gender, interest, graduation year, and "level of activity." Where there was disagreement was whether there is a customization of communications by channel. Of the eight, only three noted differences. One respondent said that communications are customized by channel depending on where the alumnus/alumna is located (for example, as Facebook is not available in China, Weibo is used instead) while another said that they tend to use Instagram for younger alumni. Yet another interviewee said that their department mails printed materials to alumni who live in other provinces, such as British Columbia.

Q4: Do you reveal more to alumni than to other stakeholders? Why or why not?

Respondents were very much divided on this question. Eight of the 12 respondents felt

McMaster does not reveal more to alumni, with the exception being alumni who serve as

representatives on governing, advisory, and/or Senate councils or boards. Two interviewees

argued that the University's status as a public institution implies that they have to be

"transparent" with everyone and not "withhold information or share more with one group over

the other." Three of the respondents felt that, while McMaster does not intentionally reveal more

to alumni versus other stakeholders, the alumni population's shared memories of, and experience

at, the Institution gives them a "stronger appetite" for the "consumption" of University-related

information.

The four people who felt that McMaster reveals more to their alumni constituent offered

different explanations as to why they felt this to be the case. Three of the respondents highlighted

the University's tendency to reach out to alumni for feedback on "challenges," in addition to

providing advance notice of certain events (such as new staffing hires). Alumni are, as one

respondent put it, considered "an internal community, rather than an external one." In another

interviewee's opinion, the reason why more information is not being revealed to alumni on a

more frequent basis is due to a fear of people "tun[ing] them out," and not out of reluctance.

Q5: In your view, do alumni have a larger influence over institutional decision-making than

other stakeholders? Why or why not?

While two respondents opted not to answer the question due to a lack of knowledge, the

remaining interviewees responded in the affirmative, albeit with caveats. One respondent stated

that alumni would only influence alumni-related initiatives. Another respondent said that the

degree of alumni influence highly depends on the issue at stake. She provided the example of

alumni having influence over academic-program design, as they were the ones who had previously been "touched' by the program. Six respondents said that alumni in senior governance positions, such as the Board of Governors, would have influence but that the common alumnus/alumna would not. In the same vein, one respondent wryly noted that alumni who donated money to the Institution had more influence than those who did not. Finally, one interviewee was of the opinion that, while alumni did have more influence than a "general audience," their influence would probably be on par with other important stakeholders, such as "major corporate donors, parents of students, local community members, and government."

Q6: Has there ever been an instance when alumni feedback has influenced the Institution's actions? Please give one example.

As a follow-up to question five, respondents were asked to describe a time when alumni feedback influenced University actions or decisions. Three respondents specifically highlighted the alumni population's influence over alumni-facing events, such as Homecoming. Three other respondents discussed how they sought alumni for feedback on their curriculum, departmental direction, and programs. Two respondents brought forth the example of how they sought out alumni opinion, through the creation of focus groups, on marketing initiatives, including McMaster's most recent branding initiative, "Brighter World." Two of the respondents observed that more opinion-solicitation surveys go out to alumni than to any other stakeholder group. Finally, one interviewee said that alumni do unconsciously affect budget use in his department as they often prioritize initiatives that affect alumni directly.

Respondents also highlighted instances when unsolicited alumni feedback altered McMaster's decisions. One respondent provided the example of when their department added a new element to their curriculum after receiving criticism from their Toronto- and Hamilton-

based alumni. Another respondent gave three examples of when alumni were able to change the course of the University's actions. The first example she highlighted was the alumni constituents' uprising against a proposed building site for a new Student Centre, causing McMaster to choose another site. The second example came during one of McMaster's branding exercises in the 1990s, where the University suggested that it refer to itself as "Mac" instead of McMaster. Alumni were adamantly against the idea, stating that the term is special to their "family" and that did not "want the whole world to be calling [the University] Mac." The final example referenced a time when student leaders enlisted the help of their alumni representative to protest the implementation of a convocation fee. The fee was successfully removed as a result of the alumni representative's advocation.

Q7: Is there something important that I forgot and/or is there anything else you think I should know about McMaster's relationships and communications with its alumni?

This question gave respondents the opportunity to express anything that was not mentioned during the interview. While interviewees did not offer any additional information, the responses to this question yielded fascinating insights in to the University's stance regarding alumni. Specifically, several respondents used the analogy of family to discuss the alumni relationship with McMaster. One respondent referred to McMaster as a "second home" for alumni, while another stressed the personal relationship that exists between the University and the alumni constituents. One interviewee stated that, unlike other relationships where one "opts in," the alumni relationship is unique in that it is predicated on a "moment in time."

Many respondents also discussed the need to view currently enrolled students as "alumni in residence." As one interviewee posited, students are "the whole raison d'etre [of University staff]. The reason we can be here is that hopefully they can […] go out to the world. They're sort

of our product." Another respondent expressed something similar, highlighting the fact that "the

alumni relationship is not really that different from the student relationship or the employer

relationship or the donor relationship" because "very often they are the same person at different

places in their lives."

Content analysis

Of the 940 articles and posts analyzed, close to one-quarter (23.62%, n=222) of the

communications were alumni-related, primarily consisting of alumni profiles and achievements.

The Business School and Alumni Advancement department additionally used alumni to co-

create content for their blog and Instagram account, respectively. The second and third most

popular communication topics (events and direct messages) were often addressed to alumni as

well. Therefore, alumni-focused topics comprised more than half (62.4%, n=589) of the analyzed

communications. A breakdown can be found in Table 6:

Table 6

Summary by topic, n=940

Topic	n	%
Alumni-related	222	23.52
Event-related	200	21.19
Direct messages	163	17.34
Campus-related	107	11.33
Research	73	7.73
Student-related	73	7.73
Faculty-related	47	4.98
Staff-related	30	3.18
University-wide achievements	25	2.65

Close to one-third (71.17%, n=669) of the communications analyzed displayed partiality

towards McMaster, as ascertained by the tone and subject matter of the message and/or the use

of affirmative adjectives and verbs by the University. Upon a further analysis of the 163 direct

messages, the word, "thank you (n=40)" appeared the most often, followed by "gift (n=28),"

"support (n=24)," and "students (n=16)." This is understandable given the fact that the majority

of direct messages referenced alumni donations. Other words that were used more than five

times reiterated feelings of community, achievement, and positivity. Table 7 displays the 11 most

commonly used words:

Table 7

Words used more than five times in direct messages, n=163

Word	Count M	%
Thank you	40	24.54
Gift	28	17.18
Support	24	14.72
Students	16	9.82
Awesome	8	4.91
Congratulations	8	4.91
Success	8	4.91
Welcome	7	4.29
Family	6	3.68
Generosity	6	3.68
Proud	6	3.68

Note. Figures represented are mean scores.

Finally, the social media posts that garnered the most likes were event and campus-

related. On Instagram, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's August 26th surprise visit to the

McMaster campus was the most popular post, while on Twitter, the most well received tweet

showed a picture of the incoming class of 2021 on August 28th. On Facebook, users were

overwhelmingly excited about McMaster's September 18th announcement of its intentions to

become a tobacco and smoke-free campus on January 1st, 2018.

Discussion

Specific conclusions were drawn from the assembled data and then applied to the respective research questions. The data was also examined against the literature studied, and specific inferences were drawn from the University's communications to, and perception of, its alumni population.

RQ1: How and to what extent does the University view and treat alumni differently than other external stakeholders?

There is no doubt that alumni occupy a very special place within McMaster's growth and engagement strategy, with the group considered a key stakeholder by both University staff and alumni themselves. Connected by a mutual interest in the continued and growing success of the University, McMaster and its alumni constituents can best be described as being in a covenantal relationship where both parties have the opportunity to engage in "open exchanges" with each other in order to reach "win-win" outcomes (Hung, 2008, p. 456). Within their organization-public relationship, McMaster appears to view its alumni population as fulfilling a number of roles, including ambassador, advisor, contributor, and extended family to the Institution.

As people who have experienced McMaster's campus and academic programs first hand, alumni are seen as living proof of the University's educational quality and effectiveness; and, whether wittingly or not, become McMaster's representatives upon their graduation from the Institution. As such, several McMaster staff consider alumni essential to the development and maintenance of the University's reputation. Relationships with alumni are therefore nurtured from the perspective that these people are, or have the potential to become, McMaster's free media and largest champions outside of the Institution.

As alumni possess a deeper understanding of the Institution compared to other external stakeholders, University staff also make formal and informal advisory roles available to the constituents. Formally, alumni are given opportunities to express their advice and opinions at major decision-making tables and advisory boards. Alumni members involved in these groups naturally exert more influence over the Institution, and are entrusted with more information, than their colleagues. However, the general alumni population also possesses some informal influence over McMaster. In situations where the institution does something that contradicts the constituent's collective memory or perception of their Alma mater, alumni have been known to successfully advocate against and alter the course of the University's actions.

McMaster also sees alumni as being contributors to the institution. As people who have had lengthy relationships with the University, McMaster often requests the constituents' support in various operational and promotional initiatives. Alumni are typically asked to participate in welcoming, mentoring, volunteering, and/or fundraising functions; with some specific alumni additionally called upon to contribute their expertise to relevant initiatives, issues, and events. When it comes to this aspect of the alumni-university relationship, one University staff member described McMaster as being reliant on their alumni, introducing an interesting power dynamic between the two parties that may not necessarily be present with other stakeholders.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, what differentiates the alumni constituents from other stakeholders the most is McMaster's belief that they are extended family members. Not only does this put alumni in an interesting position relative to the University, but the designation also places certain privileges and expectations upon alumni. From the perspective of privilege, alumni receive specific benefits, enjoy a closer relationship to the University, and have facilitated access to McMaster through a larger array of communication channels and

touchpoints. Additionally, they are also given the opportunity to access privileged information and contribute to University decision-making, should they wish to pursue one of the designated seats available to them on advisory and governing boards. However, the alumni constituents' shared history with the Institution, unchanging status as McMaster alumni, and automatic enrollment into the Alumni Association following graduation, does impose certain expectations on the group. Specifically, there is an assumption that these alumni will be pre-dispositioned to engage with and support McMaster in the years ahead, whether this turns out to be true or not.

RQ2: How and to what extent do University communications to alumni differ from communications to other external stakeholders?

McMaster's shared history with its alumni constituents does influence its communications to them. Specifically, the University differentiates its communications to alumni from the perspective of media, content, and approach. When it comes to media, McMaster alumni have several dedicated communication channels, including a website, magazines (published centrally by Alumni Advancement and departmentally by some individual faculties), and three social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram). The social media platforms particularly help facilitate two-way, symmetrical communications between the alumni constituents and the University, allowing both parties the opportunity to reach each other freely and instantaneously. In fact, McMaster actively seeks the opinions of their alumni constituents, using social media to pose questions to, and interact with, alumni.

McMaster also designs content to alumni with an underlying assumption that the audience consuming the information has a higher baseline of understanding regarding the University, as well as a continuing propensity and interest in consuming institution-related information. To illustrate this point using three examples: First, the University posted a photo of

an annual welcome-week tradition, namely the first-year students forming the numbers of their future graduating year (2021), on their alumni social media feeds. This photo gained an overwhelmingly positive response from alumni users after it was posted. Next, McMaster promoted the use of its hashtag, #howmaroonareyou, on a number of their alumni Twitter posts. While this hashtag did not garner the same number of responses as the welcome-week photo, alumni appeared to have no issues understanding the reference to McMaster's official school colours of maroon and grey (McMaster University, 2018a). Finally, the University announced its intention to become a smoke- and tobacco-free campus in 2018 on its alumni Facebook page, eliciting another record number of likes from alumni users upon the post's release.

While it has already been established from the content analysis that over half (62.4%) of McMaster's communications in 2017 were geared specifically towards an alumni audience, alumni were also taken into consideration in posts that seemingly had little to do with the constituents. This sentiment was made apparent through the University's choice of words and images. Specifically, the large majority of McMaster's messages were positive in tone and crafted to invoke feelings of nostalgia, unity, and pride. For example, campus-related posts included photos of popular student haunts in and around the University, incoming students were referred to as joining the "McMaster family," and news of staff, faculty, student, and/or university-wide achievements were often described as being "leading," "cutting edge," or "awesome."

What particularly differentiates McMaster's communications to alumni from its work with other stakeholders is the trust that the University displays towards the group. The institution has used its alumni constituents as a sounding board in the past, turning to alumni for informal and formal feedback on issues, events, initiatives, and programs. Additionally, similar to how

one would inform their family and/or supporters of news first, there have been instances in which McMaster has let alumni know of their triumphs, decisions, and/or developments prior to official press releases. Finally, by inviting its alumni constituents to participate in content co-creation, as seen through some alumni-authored blog and alumni-taken Instagram posts, the University further demonstrates that it treats communications to alumni differently than other stakeholders.

RQ3: How and to what extent do University communications affect alumni relationships?

Scholars have long posited that two-way, symmetrical communications help organizations maintain and improve relational outcomes, such as control mutuality, within their stakeholder relationships (Bowen & Sisson, 2015; Fisson, 2017). In the case of McMaster, the Institution does appear to be effective at using communications to maintain its relationships with the majority of its alumni. However, the University does not appear to be successful at using these communications to convert positive sentiment into tangible action, thereby creating alumni relationships that are quite passive in nature.

Though suggesting a few ways in which McMaster can improve the frequency and content of its communications to them, the majority of alumni appear satisfied with the University's outreach thus far. These alumni see themselves as being important stakeholders of McMaster and claim to be invested in University outcomes, yet approximately half of the alumni who responded to the survey have also never contacted or donated to the University. An even larger number of alumni respondents (approximately three-quarter) have never volunteered at McMaster. While low volunteering turnouts could be explained by a lack of relevant opportunities (as only 14% of alumni recall seeing any volunteer-related communications); donations are perceived by alumni to be the most communicated-about topic. Additionally, a

little over half of the alumni surveyed saw themselves as only being slightly engaged with the University. Thus, there is an obvious gap between emotional sentiment and action.

This rift can perhaps be attributed to the style of McMaster's communications to the constituent body. Some of the alumni respondents criticized McMaster's communications to them as being frequent but not very meaningful. Specifically, these alumni felt McMaster's communications did not fully address their needs and/or consider their situations. In other words, they found the communications to be generic. One common example highlighted by alumni respondents was McMaster's propensity to localize their events to the Greater Toronto Hamilton Area, thereby ignoring the needs and interests of people residing outside of the region.

Alumni also wrote of wanting more information as to how their actions affect the Institution, a request that suggests a misalignment in how they view their roles compared to McMaster staff. While University staff have referred to alumni as ambassadors whom they rely on for reputation, contribution, and support, the alumni population does not appear to have the same understanding. In fact, only two-fifths of the alumni surveyed felt McMaster would be receptive to their opinions and close-to-half believe they have very little influence on the University's decisions or actions. These results do have certain implications on the relationships that McMaster has with alumni, particularly when we take the relational outcome of control mutuality into consideration.

Control mutuality requires that each party have a certain amount of influence over the other (Gallicano & Heisler, 2011; Palenchar & Heath, 2006). Despite McMaster's attempts to practice two-way, symmetrical communications with its alumni, the constituents' desire for more impact-related information implies that current communications have not shown alumni where their power rests. As such, one of the possible reasons why alumni are not engaged could be

because they doubt their ability to change anything within the University. Additionally, Hung (2008) posited that control mutuality is dependent on parties believing that one is not trying to capitalize on the other. As most alumni have felt that donations requests (of which they see no visible impact) dominate the University's communications with them, they may in fact see their relationship with McMaster as being unbalanced, uncaring, and perhaps even exploitative.

One of the ways in which McMaster can improve their alumni relationships is to promote a feeling of control mutuality in their communications. By acceding to alumni requests for more relevant, impactful content and by giving the constituent a chance to participate in the design and frequency of disseminated communications, McMaster staff may be able to increase alumni involvement and satisfaction with the University.

Conclusions

What has emerged from the data and the research questions is that alumni can reasonably be viewed as stakeholders who are both internal and external to McMaster. While they are no longer physically on campus, they are considered by many to be "extended family" to the Institution, with privileges and expectations assigned to them as befitting their status. As products of the Institution, they have naturally established relationships with the University and, whether they realize it or not, opportunities to influence McMaster in a number of ways, including at the highest levels of governance. With this access, however, comes an unspoken assumption that alumni will be more inclined to engage with, support, and/or receive communications from the University.

In keeping with their status as hybrid internal/external stakeholders, communications are tailored in several ways. While the general alumni populace does not receive more information than other stakeholder groups, the constituent is often addressed in a more familiar tone and

manner than its counterparts. With the utilization of images and phrases designed to evoke shared memories, the highlighting of individual and institution-wide achievements, and the references to the "McMaster family," the University tries to use communications to instill a sense of unity and pride within its alumni constituents in ways that cannot be mimicked with other stakeholders.

Through the various social media platforms and feedback mechanisms available to them, alumni are also invited to practice two-way, symmetrical communications with McMaster and to participate in content co-creation. While most alumni do not take advantage of these opportunities, choosing instead to be passive in both their consumption of information and their relationship with McMaster, this does signal a willingness by the University to engage in conversations.

McMaster's approach to alumni communications therefore incorporates aspects of both internal communications and public relations. By communicating to alumni as if they are a part of a larger family unit, the University aims to build stronger relationships (Ströh, 2008), create ambassadors (Kim & Ni, 2013; Sriramesh, Rhee, & Sung, 2013), and cultivate continued loyalty and satisfaction in the Institution (Berger, 2008; Hon, 2008; Kim & Ni, 2013). Yet, the distance alumni have from McMaster, be it measured in years and/or proximity, does cause the constituent body to be occasionally treated as external stakeholders as well. Specifically, there are instances in which McMaster attempts to use communications to influence alumni perceptions of the University (Adler & Kranowitz, 2005; Coombs, 2015).

In conclusion, McMaster's treatment of, and communications to, alumni does appear to support the possibility of a stakeholder-communication continuum (Figure 1).
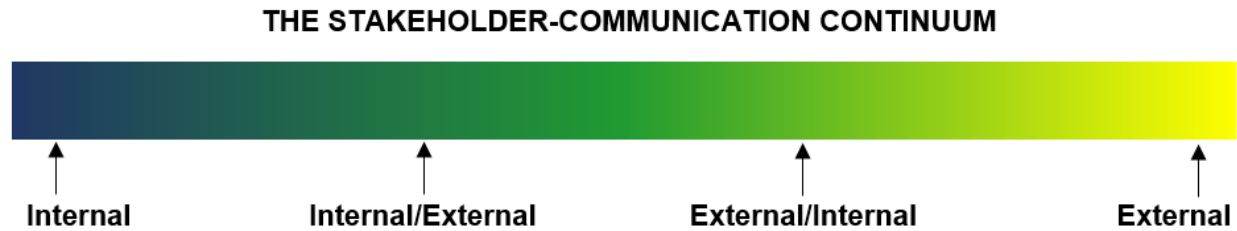
THE STAKEHOLDER-COMMUNICATION CONTINUUM

Figure 1. The stakeholder-communication continuum, as proposed by the researcher.

Limitations and Areas of Future Study

When evaluating the results of this study, three limitations need to be taken into consideration. The first limitation concerns the number of survey respondents and people interviewed. While the survey was distributed to a randomized list of 15,000 alumni, only 204 (less than 1%) of the people fully completed the survey. Given the small number of respondents, the results of the survey may not be an accurate reflection of alumni sentiment at McMaster University. This is particularly true when you consider the Institution's full alumni population of over 184,000 members (McMaster University, 2018a). Likewise, while in-depth interviews were conducted with 12 staff members in the Communications and Alumni Advancement departments, the University currently has over 2,500 administrative staff (McMaster University, 2018a). Therefore, the opinions of the 12 interview respondents may also not be representative of the larger Institution.

The second limitation concerns the interpretation of questions in the interview and survey. As seen in question three of the interview, which inquired about the specialization of alumni communications, the respondents answered the same question in different ways. When it comes to the survey, as there were no pre-set definitions regarding quantifiers, there is always a possibility that respondents may have understood the Likert-scale questions differently. For example, one respondent may equate being "very engaged" with McMaster to mean volunteering

and donating on a regular basis while another person may believe it is simply reading all communications that come from the Institution. As a result of this potential discrepancy, answers to the survey and interview questions must also not be considered to be definitive representations of McMaster staff and alumni opinions.

The third and final limitation relates to human error in the content analysis. As the researcher performed the content analysis manually, there is always a possibility that she may have miscounted or recorded a post or word incorrectly. This could particularly be true given the high volume (940) of items analyzed.

Despite these limitations, however, this paper does provide the researcher and reader with some preliminary insights into the concept of a hybrid internal/external communication designation, as well as the possibility of a stakeholder-communication continuum. It would be beneficial if others could build upon this theory through further research and testing. Specifically, the researcher would suggest that the theory be tested on other sectors and industries. As a number of the interviewees pointed out, McMaster's status as a public educational institution does place restrictions on what they can share across stakeholder groups. Thus, a similar study with private organizations and/or other industries may potentially yield a different set of results.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Alumni survey

Survey preamble

This survey is administered by Rita Chen, a master's candidate for the Communications Management program at McMaster University. The purpose of this survey is to examine the role of University communications in alumni relationships. The information gathered in this survey will be used for a final research capstone paper, due March, 2018. What she hopes to understand from this survey is if communications exists along a continuum.

To learn more about the survey and the researcher's study, particularly in terms of any associated risks or harms associated with the survey, how confidentiality and anonymity will be handled, withdrawal procedures, incentives that are promised, how to obtain information about the survey's results, how to find helpful resources should the survey make you uncomfortable or upset etc., please read the accompanying letter of information.

This survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

This survey is part of a study that has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). The MREB protocol number associated with this survey is 2017 204.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary, and you are free to stop the survey at any point in time. If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone 1-(905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Research Office for Administration, Development and Support (ROADS)
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Survey questions

PART A – QUALIFYING QUESTIONS

1. What year did you graduate from McMaster University?
   - Before 1954
   - 1955 – 1964
   - 1965 – 1974
   - 1975 – 1984
   - 1985 – 1994
   - 1995 – 2004
   - 2005 – 2014

- After 2015
- Don't know
- Not applicable

2. What level of study did you complete at the University?
   - Bachelor degree
   - Master degree
   - Post-doctoral degree
   - Other: _____
   - Don't know
   - Not applicable

3. What subject area did you study at the University?
   - Arts
   - Business
   - Engineering
   - Sciences
   - Other: _____
   - Don't know
   - Not applicable

4. Have you received communications from the University post-graduation?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Don't know
   - Not applicable

5. If you answered 'Yes' to question #4, what types of communication have you received? (Select all that apply.)
   - Emails
   - Letters
   - Surveys
   - Alumni magazines
   - Alumni newsletters
   - All of the above
   - Other (please specify): _____
   - Don't know
   - Not applicable

6. If you answered 'Yes' to question #4, how often do you receive communications from the University?
   - Once a week
   - A few times a month
   - Once a month
   - A few times a year
   - Once a year
   - Less than once a year
   - Don't know
   - Not applicable

7. If you answered 'Yes' to question #4, what type of information do you recall the University communicating to you about? (Select all that apply.)
   - University updates
   - University plans/campaigns
   - Staff, student, and/or alumni achievements
   - Staff, student, and/or alumni profiles
   - Alumni networking and social events, including reunions
   - Personal and/or professional development workshops
   - Information sessions with noted speakers
   - Donation opportunities
   - Volunteer opportunities
   - All of the above
   - Other (please specify): _____
   - Don't know
   - Not applicable

8. Have you visited the University's alumni website before?
   - Yes, I have
   - No, I haven't
   - Don't know
   - Not applicable

9. Have you made contact with the University post-graduation?
   - Yes, I have
   - No, I haven't
   - Don't know
   - Not applicable

10. Have you volunteered at the University post-graduation?
    - Yes, I have

- No, I haven't
- Don't know
- Not applicable

11. Have you donated to the University post-graduation?
- Yes, I have
- No, I haven't
- Don't know
- Not applicable

PART B – CURRENT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY

Please indicate how much you would agree or disagree with the statements below:

12. I find the University's communications to be informative:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

13. I am interested in the information that the University sends:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

14. I am satisfied with the frequency of the University's communications to me:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

15. I believe the University currently engages well with me:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

16. I believe the University is, or would be, receptive to my opinions:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

17. I believe I do, or would, have influence over the University's future activities and plans:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

18. As an alumnus/alumna, I still consider myself to be an important stakeholder at the University:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

19. As an alumnus/alumna, I feel invested in the University:
- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree

- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Not applicable

20. I would be more inclined to contact the University if they were to communicate with me more frequently:
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree or disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
    - Don't know
    - Not applicable

21. I would be more inclined to volunteer at the University if they were to communicate with me more frequently:
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree or disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
    - Don't know
    - Not applicable

22. I would be more inclined to donate to the University if they were to communicate with me more frequently:
    - Strongly agree
    - Agree
    - Neither agree or disagree
    - Disagree
    - Strongly disagree
    - Don't know
    - Not applicable

PART C – DESIRED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY

23. Moving forward, what type of communications would you be most interested in receiving from the University? (Select all that apply.)
    - University updates
    - University campaigns/plans
    - Staff, student, and/or alumni achievements

- Student, student, and/or alumni profiles
- Alumni networking and social events, including reunions
- Personal and/or professional development workshops
- Information sessions with noted speakers
- Donation opportunities
- Volunteer opportunities
- All of the above
- Other (please specify): _____
- Don't know
- Not applicable

24. Moving forward, how would you like the University to communicate with you? (Select all that apply.)
    - Emails
    - Letters
    - Surveys
    - Alumni magazines
    - Alumni newsletters
    - Social media
    - All of the above
    - Other (please specify): _____
    - Don't know
    - Not applicable

25. Moving forward, how often do you want the University to communicate with you?
    - Once a week
    - A few times a month
    - Once a month
    - A few times a year
    - Once a year
    - Less than once a year
    - Don't know
    - Not applicable

26. Besides adjusting the frequency and content of its communications to you, what else can the University do to make you feel more engaged as a stakeholder of the institution? (Open-ended response.)

Appendix B: Staff interviews

1. What is your role and responsibility when it comes to alumni communications?

2. How do you view alumni in relation to the institution?

3. Do you specialize messaging and/or communications to alumni? In what ways do you adjust messaging and/or communications?

4. Do you reveal more to alumni than to other stakeholders? Why or why not?

5. In your view, do alumni have a larger influence over institutional decision-making than other stakeholders? Why or why not?

6. Has there ever been an instance when alumni feedback has influenced the Institution's actions? Please give one example.

7. Is there something important that I forgot and/or is there anything else you think I should know about McMaster's relationships and communications with its alumni?