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Hello, Are You Listening?! Stakeholder Expectations of Listening in Organizational Social Media

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Past research has suggested that organizational listening motives and strategies align with those for interpersonal listening. In this study, researchers examined how stakeholders ($n = 299$) rated an organizational account's response – or evidence of listening – to social media posts. It was expected that responses demonstrating higher levels of active-empathic listening would be rated as more appropriate and effective. Results provide partial support for this prediction and indicate that situational contingencies can mediate the amount of active-empathic listening a response should provide. The appropriateness of organizational social media accounts using emojis, GIFs, and memes was also investigated, with about equal thirds of respondents saying they were acceptable, neutral, or unacceptable. Instances when it would be considered appropriate were to align with the style of the stakeholder's message, in response to a positive review, to convey a stronger indication of the message, and when messaging involved friendly or happy content. Implications for organizational social media managers and future directions for research are discussed.

Keywords: social media, active listening, empathic listening, listening competency, organizational communication, dialogic communication, digital community

The ability of social media to enable two-way communication has gifted organizations opportunities for listening and responding, essential parts of dialogue. Researchers have lamented how organizations have fallen short of expanding from a one-way distribution or surveillance model to true dialogue on social platforms (Brandt, 2018; Macnamara, 2018; Taylor et al., 2001). An assumption is that all stakeholders want to be involved in the social media dialogue with the organization at the same level.

Listening in social media requires an acknowledgment or action on the part of the organization from a simple “like” or favorite to an automated response or a tailored response to a post. There is no passive listening marker like eye contact. Research on listening helps organizations demonstrate more engagement on social platforms, and signals a move away from simple surveillance. Working to complete the communication cycle with more dialogue (and actual listening) creates a more equitable relationship and aligns with two-way symmetrical communication (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The purpose of this article is to better understand stakeholder expectations about listening—or responding—on organizational social media accounts. Arguably not every post will warrant a response, so identifying which posts merit responses will help organizations maximize their communication efforts and more effectively utilize their resources. Estimates reach 243 million U.S. social network users by 2025 (Statista, 2021), and social media teams will need to be even more strategic with responses and listening.

By identifying stakeholder expectations, social media managers and their organizations can tailor social media protocols and messaging to enhance listening and perceptions of listening. The article investigates how individuals rate active-empathic listening and how situational context, gender, and visual cues such as emojis influence perceptions of organizational listening on social media.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Built upon literature from public relations and interpersonal communication scholarship, this study examines the juncture where listening in interpersonal relationships translates to evidence of listening and dialogic communication on social media. Classic listening definitions include affective, behavioral, and cognitive processes and are based on small group and interpersonal interactions. Organizational listening and social listening are additional layers scholars are trying to delineate (e.g. Brandt, 2018; Macnamara, 2018; Stewart & Arnold, 2017). While some definitions of listening are broad enough to encompass computer-mediated communication, listening in social media merits some evidence like text-based responses in the form of comments, or mediated responses (like, nod, favorite or similar keystroke) that denote a message has been received.

Active-Empathic Listening

Previous research (Maben & Gearhart, 2018) has suggested that stakeholders hold implicit expectations for how an organization should listen and respond to social media posts (e.g., comments, questions) that align with interpersonal listening expectations. Specifically, in some instances, stakeholders expect organizations to exhibit competent active-empathic listening (AEL) behaviors and strategies that convey a sense of dialogic communication. AEL is combining active listening actions with empathy. Bodie et al. (2012) investigated a number of verbal and nonverbal listening behaviors associated with perceptions of competent interpersonal listening. Interestingly, they found that verbal behaviors were rated as better indicators of listening competence than nonverbal behaviors. The “good”

behaviors include asking and answering questions, making pertinent responses or comments, demonstrating an understanding and appreciation for the speaker's emotions, and offering advice and opinions (Bodie et al., 2012). Important for organizations is that social media managers can implement these verbal behaviors into their social media responses.

Previous research has supported active-empathic listening as a stable, trait-like disposition held by individuals (Bodie et al., 2013). Individuals with high levels of trait-AEL are more effective in conversation (Bodie, 2011, Study 2) and may also adapt their levels of activity and empathy for appropriateness related to a specific communication situation. Though AEL is a trait-like disposition it is also a behavioral skill that is selectively applied according to situational expectations (Bodie et al., 2013). It stands to reason that different situations, then, would elicit different expectations for AEL listening as well as influence perceptions of response appropriateness and effectiveness.

A handful of studies have investigated AEL and gender differences with varying results. Initial beliefs that gender might be associated with AEL were rooted in previous research suggesting that being female was related to a higher degree of empathy (Hoffman, 1977). Later, in listening-related research, Booth-Butterfield (1984) claimed that women and men showed differences in their listening styles in that men listened critically for facts whereas women focused on contextual aspects. Furthermore, Welch and Mickelson (2020), in an investigation of listening environments, reported that women tended to listen in a more interpersonal listening style as they change environments.

With this background in mind, Pence and James (2015) investigated AEL and gender differences directly, finding that some aspects of AEL showed relationships with one's gender. Specifically, they noted that women scored higher on the Responding subscale of the Active-Empathic Listening Scale (AELS) and suggested that women responded in a more active-empathic manner. Lastly, in another study on individual differences and AELS, Kourmoussi et al. (2018) identified gender, more so than other factors of age or mental health training, as having the greatest effect on the Sensing and Responding subscales of the AELS across 3,995 Greek educators at all teaching levels and specialties.

Taken together, past research suggests that women demonstrate higher degrees of interpersonal listening qualities like empathy and showed higher levels of AEL sensing and responding than did men. Therefore, it might be assumed that women would expect higher degrees of activity and empathy from a listening organization. Furthermore, they may also interpret higher AEL responses as more appropriate and effective given their higher AEL responding scores.

In general, stakeholders expect some level of activity and empathy from a listening organization, but the context of the communication can elicit varying expectations (Gearhart & Maben, 2019). College student respondents reported that organizational responses containing higher levels of activity and empathy were rated as being more competent than those that had either lower levels of activity or empathy (or both) (Gearhart & Maben, 2019). Although situational differences in expectations for activity and empathy were identified, most respondents consistently preferred active-empathic messages. Active and empathic messages support notions of dialogic communication – people want to be heard and actively shown they are (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Dialogue and Organizational Communication

In researching strategic communication, Macnamara (2018) has appealed to organizations to embrace dialogue and two-way communication, specifically listening. Strategic communication models start with the organization and its goals first in a one-way manner. Macnamara and Gregory (2018)

assert that stakeholders can be engaged in the evaluation part of the strategic communication process and improved organizational listening should be a required piece of evaluation. What actually occurs in organizational communication is organization-centric, thus the need to implement an architecture of listening (Macnamara, 2018). In 2008, Brunner called for listening – “the process of interaction, interpretation, and response” – to be added to communication models (p. 79). Models like dialogic communication call for two-way communication. Over the years, definitions and implementation of dialogic communication have varied with little overt mention of listening.

In dialogic communication, organizations need five essential components for creating dialogue with stakeholders: mutuality, empathy, risk, propinquity, and commitment (Kent & Taylor, 2002). For dialogue in social media, this means connecting through platforms, which offer the potential for all five essential components, especially empathy and propinquity (Maben & Gearhart, 2018). Whether true dialogue with a focus on understanding and interaction (Kent & Lane, 2021) or a more transactional dialogue for problem-solving or information exchange occurs (see Buber’s technical dialogue, Kramer & Gawlick, 2003), stakeholders want acknowledgment that they have been heard. The evidence of listening might be a text response or even one with graphical enhancements like an emoji or GIF.

Visual Media Use in Social Media

In addition to offering a space for dialogic communication, social media platforms accommodate graphics, images, videos, and audio. More media-rich responses are possible, providing beneficial clues akin to nonverbal ones occurring in face-to-face communication (Tang & Hew, 2019). Media richness theory suggests that communicators should select a richer medium for more complex tasks (see Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986; Daft et al., 1987; Ishii et al., 2019). A complicated change at an organization might merit a face-to-face meeting whereas a simple policy change might only need a short email. One part of media richness is the availability of additional cues that denote mood, tone, humor, sarcasm, etc. A text-only message may come across to the recipient with an unintended tone. Emojis, small digital symbols or icons that complement or replace a text-based message, offer cues to a message, especially about emotions and intended meaning. For stakeholders, that could be a clapping hand emoji (👏) to say congratulations to their favorite organization for good news posted in social media. In advertisements, Das et al. (2019) found that emojis had a positive effect on purchasing intentions for hedonic products compared to messages without emojis. Ko et al. (2022) found that brand posts with emojis on Instagram elicited more likes (increased by 72%) and comments (increased by 70%) than those without emojis.

GIFs and memes are graphics that might replace or accompany a text-based message in digital communication. Internet memes are “a group of digital content units sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance” that can be adapted by other users (Shifman, 2014, p. 177). Examples are the distracted boyfriend or woman yelling at a cat; others can remix the image to apply their scenario to the text or use an existing version. Graphical interchange formats or GIFs are typically animated or looping silent, moving images that help to convey a message recipient’s reaction. Famous examples are a clip of Michael Jackson eating popcorn in a movie theater or Kermit’s flailing. Emojis, GIFs, and memes communicate with the additional visual cues, but also carry shortcuts of embedded meaning themselves. In the current study, we investigate how appropriate stakeholders perceive these visuals are for organizations to use in their responses on social media.

Current Study

This research uses Bodie et al. (2012) and AEL as a theoretical frame to illustrate stakeholder expectations of an architecture of listening on organizational social media accounts. The study focuses on the following:

H1: Individuals will rate organizational responses showing higher levels of AEL as more competent.

RQ1: Does situational context influence expectations for AEL responses?

RQ2: Does gender influence expectations for activity or empathy for an organization's response?

RQ3: Does gender influence ratings of organizational response competence?

RQ4: How appropriate do stakeholders find the usage of visual cues like emojis, GIFs, and memes, in organizational social media responses?

METHODS

Participants

Overall, 314 respondents completed the web-based survey hosted on Qualtrics used for this study. Mahalanobis Distance values and probabilities were calculated in SPSS (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), and respondents with probabilities $\leq .001$ were removed from the data ($n = 15$) leaving a final sample of 299 respondents. Participants were recruited via a contracted survey respondent service offered by Qualtrics and were paid \$5 USD for participation. Sample selection and eligibility criteria included English fluency, age 25 or older, and being a daily social media user. Participants averaged 52.8 years old ($SD = 17.52$), were primarily female ($n = 175$; 58.3%), white ($n = 243$; 81.3%), with a college or graduate degree ($n = 149$; 50%). Respondents averaged 15 minutes to complete the survey.

Procedures

Participants were first presented with informed consent regarding the study's purpose, procedures, and protections, and confirmed they were over age 18, could fluently read and speak English, and used social media daily. Respondents reported which social media platforms they used and estimated the number of hours per day spent on all social media platforms, which were Facebook ($n = 268$), YouTube ($n = 190$), and Instagram ($n = 141$), at an average of 3.73 hours per day ($Mdn = 2.50$ hrs).

Contacting an Organization

Participants reported if they had ever contacted an organization seeking a response via social media with 43.3% ($n = 130$) indicating "yes". From the possible choices of reasons for contacting an organization through social media, the top three motivations included "To obtain an answer to a question" ($n = 78$), "To obtain help or resources" ($n = 59$), and "To give thanks" ($n = 44$). When asked if they received a response and were satisfied with that response, 67 respondents (51.5%) reported "most of the time" or "always" they received a response with 112 (86.2%) reporting the organization's response "met" or "exceeded" expectations.

Manipulation Check

Eight follower posts were initially created by the researchers along with 16 organizational responses (two for each follower post). The posts to the organizations along with possible organizational responses were reviewed by a set of expert reviewers ($N = 9$) who were doctoral candidates in a

communication program at a large southeastern university. Organizational responses varied with respect to the level of activity and empathy in the response, and reviewers determined if a response option was either high or low in active-empathic listening. Agreement amongst raters about response type helped ensure response options appropriately manipulated categories of high/low AEL messages, and their feedback helped in the selection of the four hypothetical situations used in this study. The four situations (of the eight presented to the reviewers) that showed the most common agreement regarding response types (high AEL vs. low AEL responses) were selected.

Hypothetical Scenarios

Next, all respondents completed a series of four sections each containing two parts. In the first part, participants were presented with one of four hypothetical posts to an organization from a social media follower of said organization. All posts were created for use in this study and were based on real social media posts. The four organizations included an airline (Situation 1), a department store (S2), a novelty gift store (S3), and a veterinary clinic (S4). Posts differed in valence from positive to negative and reflected a variety of contexts for why individuals might contact an organization including complaints (S1 and S2), a request (S3), and praise (S4). Posts were created via a social media emulator and had the appearance of real posts from either Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram (see Figure 1).

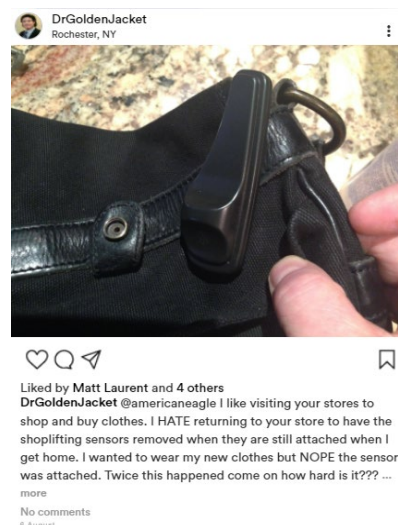


Figure 1. One scenario (S2) used as a stakeholder message to an organizational social media account. Survey respondents were then asked to rate expectations for activity and empathy from the organization.

After reading the hypothetical post, respondents indicated their level of agreement on a 7-point rating scale (1 = *strongly disagree* / 7 = *strongly agree*) regarding expectations they held about how active (“I would expect the company to give me immediate attention”) and empathic (“Being sensitive to my feelings is necessary”) the organization’s response should be. They were also asked about perceptions of scenario realism (“I could imagine this situation happening in real life”).

Upon rating their expectations, subjects moved to the second part of the section. Here, respondents were randomly assigned one of two hypothetical responses from the organization. Each of the four hypothetical scenarios had its own unique pair of organizational responses. There was no control group. These responses were also created via a social media emulator. In the responses, activity and empathy were manipulated to produce an organizational response either low or high in AEL. Effort

was made to ensure organizational responses were similar across the response types as a control. High AEL responses averaged 43.25 words compared to a 42-word average for low AEL responses, with the largest difference being ± 4 words. Group sizes were approximately equivalent across the response types (average difference ± 4.5).

After reading the randomly assigned organizational response, participants rated their level of agreement with the perceived appropriateness (“The company’s attention to the situation was appropriate”) and effectiveness (“This would be an effective response to the situation”) of the organization’s response. Once they rated the randomly assigned response, respondents were finished with the second part and moved to the next hypothetical scenario and repeated the same two-part sequence (rating expectations and then rating response quality) until they had worked through all four hypothetical scenarios. All subjects were exposed to the same four hypothetical scenarios.

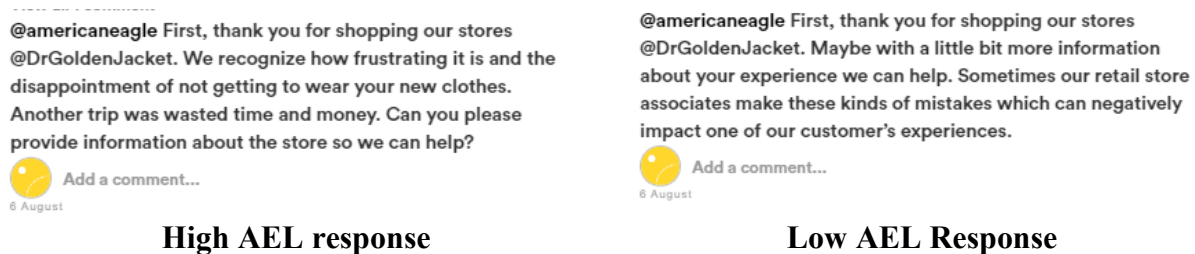


Figure 2. Hypothetical organization’s responses to the original post in Figure 1. Survey respondents were randomly assigned one of the two responses which were mixes of high and low activity and empathy.

Measures

Measures used in this study were adapted from Gearhart and Maben (2019) by reducing the number of items in each question set. Information regarding the measures including means, standard deviations, and Cronbach’s alphas is presented in Table 1. The appropriateness and effectiveness variables were highly correlated (average $r > .92$), and given these are two dimensions of communication competence (Spitzberg, 2000), the variables were combined into a single composite variable labeled Competence. Subjects had Competence scores calculated for their randomly assigned organizational response within each situation which served as a primary dependent variable of interest.

Analysis of Situations. Hypothetical social media posts were intended to measure various types of situations for which a person might connect with an organization on social media. They were developed by the researchers as representations of real posts. Survey respondents generally agreed they were realistic (see Realism means in Table 1) however it should be noted that alphas for the Realism construct were below the .70 threshold across all four situations.

To investigate contextual differences and answer RQ1, situations were compared to assess differences in expectations for activity/empathy in the organization’s response. In most cases, means in Table 1 indicate that S1 and S2 (service complaints) were rated as having greater expectations for activity/empathy as compared to S3 (donation request) and S4 (praise). MANOVA analysis was performed to explore differences in expectations of empathy and activity across the four situations. There was a statistically significant difference in expectations for Activity and Empathy based on the

situation, $F(6, 2382) = 14.39, p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.93$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$. Tests indicated a statistically significant effect on both Activity ($F(3, 1192) = 17.49; p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .03$) and Empathy scores ($F(3, 1192) = 10.79; p < .001$; partial $\eta^2 = .02$). Post-hoc Tukey analysis found that Activity scores were significantly different between S1 and S3 ($p < .01$), S1 and S4 ($p < .001$), S2 and S4 ($p < .001$), and Empathy scores were significantly different between S1 and S3 ($p < .001$), S1 and S4 ($p < .01$), and S2 and S3 ($p = .05$).

Table 1
Scale Means, Standard Deviations, and Alphas

Situations	1	2	3	4
Activity ($n = 7$)	5.80 (1.06) $\alpha = .88$	5.65 (1.12) $\alpha = .92$	5.47 (1.14) $\alpha = .90$	5.24 (1.25) $\alpha = .92$
Empathy ($n = 6$)	5.74 (1.15) $\alpha = .84$	5.55 (1.17) $\alpha = .89$	5.31 (1.19) $\alpha = .86$	5.67 (1.18) $\alpha = .91$
Realism ($n = 4$)	5.07 (1.20) $\alpha = .65$	5.32 (1.24) $\alpha = .64$	5.38 (1.09) $\alpha = .56$	5.31 (1.15) $\alpha = .58$
Responses				
Appropriateness ($n = 5$)	5.66 (1.25) $\alpha = .94$	4.82 (1.52) $\alpha = .95$	5.35 (1.41) $\alpha = .96$	6.05 (1.06) $\alpha = .93$
Effectiveness ($n = 4$)	5.52 (1.27) $\alpha = .90$	4.68 (1.60) $\alpha = .94$	5.15 (1.49) $\alpha = .93$	6.03 (1.04) $\alpha = .92$
Competence (summative)	5.59 (1.46)	4.75 (1.31)	5.16 (1.41)	6.04 (1.56)

Note. Standard Deviations are in parentheses.

Qualitative Review of Open-ended Questions

Two coders external to the study reviewed the open-ended responses to questions asking respondents “In what instances would it be acceptable for an organization to use emojis in social media responses” and “In what instances would it be acceptable for an organization to use GIFs or memes in social media responses.” Coders used an open coding scheme looking for emergent themes in independent reviews of the comments. They then conferred on the themes each found and revised and collapsed similar categories (Creswell, 1998).

RESULTS

Hypothesis (H1) predicted that participants would rate organizational responses showing higher levels of AEL as more Competent. A global independent samples t -test was performed with response type as the grouping variable and Competence as the dependent variable. The general test indicated a

significant difference between the response types, $t(1194) = -3.77, p < .01, d = .21$, with low AEL responses ($M = 5.23; SD = 1.52$) being rated as overall less competent than high AEL responses ($M = 5.54; SD = 1.38$).

Further testing H1, independent samples t -tests were performed for each situation individually with the same variables as before. Results of the t -tests are reported in Table 2. Two t -tests, for S1 and S2, indicated response type had a significant effect on perceptions of Competence with a range of effect sizes ($d = .23$ to $.64$). Again, means indicated that low AEL responses were rated as less competent than high AEL responses.

Table 2
Independent samples t-tests

	<i>F</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>M_{low}</i>	<i>M_{high}</i>	<i>M_{diff}</i>
S1	5.243	-2.204	.028**	297	5.43	5.74	-.31
S2	10.886	-5.545	.001*	297	4.25	5.24	-.99
S3	.126	.010	.992	297	5.16	5.16	.00
S4	4.410	-.209	.835	294	6.03	6.05	-.03

Note. * = $p < .01$; ** = $p < .05$

Finally, an omnibus ANOVA was performed to test the interaction of response type (low/high AEL) and situation on the dependent variable Competence (Model 1). Results are reported in Table 3. Results lend partial support for the prediction that respondents rate high AEL responses as more competent than low AEL responses.

In exploration of RQ2, a MANOVA analysis was performed to test the influence of gender, response type, and situation on expectations for response activity and empathy. There was not a statistically significant difference in expected activity or empathy based on a respondent's gender, $F(2, 1155) = 1.23, p = .29$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.99$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$. This indicates that one's reported gender identity had no significant effect on expectations for activity or empathy. The only factor in the model that was significant was the situation, $F(6, 2312) = 12.80, p < .001$; Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.94$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, providing further evidence of the different expectations for activity and empathy across the situations (RQ1).

A secondary pair of independent samples t -tests comparing genders on both expected activity and empathy were also non-significant: for Activity, $t(1, 1170) = -1.10, p = .14, d = .07$, and in Empathy, $t(1, 1170) = -1.50, p = .07, d = .09$. Results do not indicate gender having any significant effect on expectations for activity and empathy.

Table 3
*ANOVA test of Response * Situation * Gender on Competence*

	<i>DF</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	η^2
Model 1	7	27.30	.001*	.14
Response	1	50.08	.001*	.02
Situation	3	17.68	.001*	.11
Response * Situation	3	8.56	.001*	.02
Model 2	15	13.63	.001	.15
Gender	1	.03	.87	.00
Response	1	13.48	.001*	.01
Situation	3	43.36	.001*	.10
Gender * Response	1	6.01	.01**	.01
Gender * Situation	3	3.26	.02**	.01
Response * Situation * Gender	3	.64	.59	.00

Note. * = $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$

To answer RQ3, gender was added as a factor to the ANOVA model used in H1 testing. The full model was significant however the factor of gender alone was not significant (see Table 3, Model 2). The interaction of response type and gender and the interaction of situation and gender on Competence ratings was significant. The interaction of all three factors—gender, response type, and situation—was not significant. Results indicate that Situation ($\eta^2 = .10$) had the largest effect on ratings of response competence.

A secondary global independent samples *t*-test was also performed and was not significant, $t(1, 1170) = .17, p = .86, d = .00$. Across all four scenarios male means for Competence ($M = 5.39; SD = 1.44$) were similar to females ($M = 5.38; SD = 1.48$). Because there was a significant interaction effect between gender and situation in the preceding ANOVA test (Model 2), independent samples *t*-tests were performed individually for each of the four hypothetical situations. In two situations the differences between genders were statistically significant: for S2, $t(1, 291) = 2.26, p = .01, d = .28$ and in S4, $t(1, 291) = -1.66, p = .05, d = .19$. These results suggest that gender alone may not be a significant factor in determining ratings of organizational response competence, but does play a role through interactions with other factors such as the situation.

For RQ4, descriptive statistics were analyzed for survey questions asking participants about the appropriateness of using emojis, GIFs, and memes as listening responses from organizational social media accounts. Results from a 5-point scale (1-*Inappropriate* to 5-*Appropriate*) indicated limited support for the use of some of these types of media in organizational responses. Emoji use in a response received the highest appropriateness score of the three media types ($M = 3.20$; $SD = 1.33$); 43% ($n = 128$) reported they were “slightly appropriate” or “appropriate,” about 28% of respondents indicated they were “slightly inappropriate” or “not appropriate” ($n = 85$), 29% were neutral ($n = 86$).

For GIFs and memes, participants were more supportive of the appropriateness of GIFs ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.28$) as compared to the use of memes ($M = 2.36$; $SD = 1.33$). In Table 4, participant responses were collapsed into three categories: no support for use, neutral, support for use. Remarkably, nearly a third of participants equally indicated either no support, neutrality, or support for GIF use. A few more participants indicated that it was “slightly inappropriate” or “inappropriate” to use memes. In open-ended questions, respondents were asked to give instances when it would be acceptable for an organization to use emojis and GIFs/memes. For emojis, four themes emerged for acceptable use: in response to a positive review, in response to an emoji, to convey meaning, and when messaging involved friendly or happy content. GIFs and memes were collapsed into one question and respondents suggested acceptability when responding to a GIF or meme, in response to a positive review, when messaging involved friendly or happy content, and for humor. When respondents send text-based messages to an organization via social media, 87% expect a text-based message in response, about 8% expect a GIF or image and only 5% expect a video or audio message. It changes slightly when respondents themselves use a GIF or image in their initial messaging: about 59% expect a text-based message in response, 35% expect a GIF or image and only 6% expect a video or audio message.

Table 4

Counts and Percentages for Appropriateness of Organizational Media Use in Responses

	GIFs	Emojis	Memes
Slightly inappropriate / Inappropriate	99 (33%)	85 (28%)	106 (35%)
Neutral	101(34%)	86 (29%)	97 (33%)
Slightly appropriate / Appropriate	99 (33%)	128 (43%)	96 (32%)

DISCUSSION

These results are in line with previous findings from Gearhart and Maben (2019) where hypothetical responses from organizations on social media that were higher in AEL were rated as more competent. A key difference in these two studies was the sample; the current study used an older adult population whereas the previous study sample was composed of majority college students. Of Americans online, 73% of those ages 50-64 say they use social media (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), so the average survey respondent for this project (average of 52.8 years old) is representative of a large portion of those of similar age active in social media. Taken together, the results of these two studies support the use of more active and empathic responses by organizations on their social media platforms. This type of responding promotes listening, can spark dialogic, two-way communication, and offers a more personalized and immediate experience for the stakeholders.

Not all listening situations are the same, and research has previously found there are situational contingencies to the use of AEL (Bodie et al., 2013). In response to RQ1, the variety of situations utilized in this study suggest that high AEL responses may not be relevant or expected in every social media communication between stakeholders and organizations. But social media managers need to know what situations warrant high AEL responses. Of the hypothetical situations used in this analysis, the two that showed largest mean differences between high and low AEL responses portrayed stakeholders frustrated and upset with the organization's quality of service. The situations where no significant differences in response types were found were one of praise to the organization and the other a donation request. Further investigation into the means of expected levels of empathy and activity also partially confirms speculation regarding the situational contingency of AEL social media responses (Table 1).

Additionally, results from RQ1 indicate that S4—a situation where the organization was praised by a follower—differed from the other scenarios by showing significantly lower ratings for expected activity and empathy. Together these findings suggest that in situations where expectations for activity and empathy are high, respondents differentiate more acutely between high and low AEL responses. Whereas in S3 and S4, when expectations for AEL were lower, the response type did not appear to matter as much to respondents. This suggests that listeners have an established schema for what situations require higher levels of AEL responsiveness and also which responses meet those schematic expectations (Bodie et al., 2012). These findings are of particular importance to social media managers of organizations because 12.3% of the 130 respondents who indicated contacting an organization via social media did so to express a complaint about service. Future research needs to consider other types of situations that, like service complaints, might also activate higher AEL expectations. This may help inform social media managers about labeling certain messages as necessitating AEL and routing them to a specific listening agent.

The research questions regarding the influence of gender on AEL expectations and ratings of organizational response competence were not clearly answered. Briefly, results of this study find no significant global effect of gender on AEL expectations or ratings of competence. Although it may be surmised that if females reported higher scores on AEL sensing and responding factors (Pence & James, 2015), then they would be more likely to see high AEL responses as necessary and of better quality, this reasoning was not reflected in the current data.

Instead, the influence of gender on AEL social media listening expectations and competence ratings was only through interactions with other variables such as situational context. For example, women rated organizational responses to S2 (both high and low AEL) significantly lower than men. This was a service complaint situation involving a department store mistake. Additionally, women rated the response to the praise of a vet as being more positive than did men. These results suggest that, at least in this study, women had unmet expectations for AEL responses in a service complaint response and had their expectations exceeded during an organizational praise response. If anything, this study indicates that social media managers should attend more to the situational factors of a post than to the poster's gender (if even known) when listening and then crafting responses.

For the appropriateness of organization's use of graphic representations as social media listening, results were mixed. Emojis, GIFS, and memes received nearly a third of the sample for appropriate, neutral and not appropriate. Emojis were the most appropriate and memes the least. In the survey,

respondents were not given examples or definitions of emojis, memes, and GIFs, but were left to their own determinations. Future studies could account for this limitation.

Media richness theory would suggest that more complex messages need more cues, like a visual, but respondents were not confident in the overall usage of these graphics for organizational responses. The dual-nature, hidden, and ever-changing meanings of many marks could cause misunderstandings and embarrassment for the organization. While social media can be a space for casual conversation, many organizations maintain a professional business tone. For social media teams, responding with a text-based message, maybe even from a bank of sample messages, is quicker than selecting an appropriate and relevant GIF for each message. Organizational social media policies may also prohibit teams from using the riskier media types. Video and audio responses, the most rich of media, would be the most time consuming and vastly overshoot stakeholder expectations of simply receiving a response.

Implications

Theoretical implications of this study are the application of AEL to listening beyond interpersonal listening. Results support the idea that organizational listening motives and strategies align with those for interpersonal listening. This study joins a small but growing focus on listening as part of the organizational communication process for strategic communication and social media. The research connects two areas of study, bridging listening to what O'Sullivan and Carr (2018) call masspersonal communication, where mediated communication is both mass communication and interpersonal communication. This study considers listening (and responding) for organizations and their masspersonal channels of communication on social media accounts.

Practical implications include guidance for social media teams. Repositioning them as an organization's listeners and not just content creators can build an organization's overall dialogue with stakeholders. Social media teams can employ AEL for listening on their social channels with an intent to understand and empathize, not just solve a problem. Given the amount of social media traffic, organizations can use AEL to better determine messages that merit more attention, empathy, and action.

Limitations and Future Research

As evidenced in Table 1, reliability estimates for the Realism factor for each of the situations was below the .70 threshold, which could be interpreted as items that were not consistent across respondents. A potential cause of poor reliability estimates was the use of a negatively-worded item in the set of items. In all situations, when the reverse-coded item was removed from alpha coefficient calculations the reliability improved ($\alpha \geq .80$). Additionally, Realism means indicate that respondents were in agreement that situations were realistic. Using paid survey respondents through contracted services has some limitations (Schoenerr et al., 2015), and the sample continued to skew to primarily white, female, college-educated respondents.

Future research needs to further examine various scenarios, new platforms, and multimedia inclusion in organizational social media usage. Research needs to include social media managers' listening traits and perceptions, as well as organizational social media policies to illuminate the other side of this communication process. This could lead to more strategic listening policies, tailored listening training, and hiring high AEL-trait listeners for social media roles to better meet and exceed stakeholder expectations for social media dialogue.

In conclusion, results of this study indicate that organizational social media responses are rated as more competent when they are higher in AEL, particularly in situations involving service complaints.

Using emojis, GIFs, and memes should be strategic and each organization will need to A/B test messaging on platforms to identify stakeholder acceptance for the multimedia markers. No one approach is universally effective for organizational listening on social media. The communication cycle is laden with variables like situation context, organization type, target audience, media type, platform properties, etc., which could influence perceptions of organizational listening. What is clear is that for organizations in social media, creating a digital community will require listening and responding to stakeholders.

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