Digital public relations through the lens of affordances:

A conceptual expansion of the dialogic principles

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Please cite the journal publication: Zhou, A., & Xu, S. (2021). Digital public relations through the lens of affordances: A conceptual expansion of the dialogic principles. *Journal of Public Relations Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2022.2046585>

We thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments. The manuscript's previous versions, circulated as "Remaking dialogic principles for the digital age: The role of affordances in dialogue and engagement" and "Digital public relations through the lens of affordances: A conceptual update of the "ease of interface" dialogic principle," were presented at the 69th annual meeting of the International Communication Association as the Top Faculty Paper of the Public Relations Division and the recipient of the Robert Heath Award.

Abstract

Connecting the affordance framework in computer-mediated communication to public relations theories, this essay proposes an affordance perspective on dialogic communication and digital public relations in general. We argue that 1) the enactment of organization-public dialogue on digital platforms requires certain combinations of media affordances; 2) the lens of affordances facilitates a non-dichotomous examination of the “dialogic communication vs. digital media” debate; 3) the fifth dialogic principle “ease of interface” should be conceptually expanded to “favorable affordances,” which asserts that public relations practice should evaluate digital media platforms’ various action possibilities and consider their inherent potentials for organization-public relationship building; and 4) research on digital public relations should incorporate affordance theory to achieve cross-platform theorization.

Keywords: Affordances, Digital Public Relations, Social Media, Dialogue, Dialogic Communication, Dialogic Principles

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Social media has dramatically changed the landscape of public relations practice and spawned much interest from public relations scholars (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kent & Saffer, 2014; Sommerfeldt & Xu, 2017). The plethora of research has contributed to many areas such as nonprofit public relations (e.g., Lovejoy et al., 2012), digital activism (e.g., Xiong et al., 5 2019), and socially mediated public discourses (e.g., Xu & Zhou, 2020).

Initially proposed to reconsider public relations ethics (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and address digital public relations practice via website communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998), the dialogic theory and digital dialogic principles have long been adopted and adapted to evaluate organizations' communication practice on social media (e.g., Men et al., 2018; Theunissen, 2015; 10 Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). However, the adaptation of dialogic concepts proposed at the dawn of the World Wide Web to more-recent digital media developments is anything but a triumph. First, in the stream of research probing the communication of organizations' dialogic orientations, scholars have started critiquing the blanket use of the term "dialogue" in social media studies, considering the interpersonal nature of dialogue inherently unsuitable for digital 15 contexts, and arguing that "digital dialogue" is an oxymoron (e.g., Kent & Theunissen, 2016; Lane, 2020; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). Second, in the stream of research probing the application of digital dialogic principles for public relations practice, the "ease of interface" principle has gradually lost its relevance and received little to no scholarly attention for years (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018), with researchers seeming to completely ignore the principle 20 because the social media interface remained "indiscriminate and by default" (i.e., constant) throughout their studies (e.g., Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Wang & Yang, 2020; Watkins, 2017; Yue et al., 2021).

Opportunities to advance the dialogic theory, digital dialogic principles, and the broader public relations research in digital contexts thus reside in the reconciliation of this theoretical 25 tension. Through the lens of affordances developed in psychology and human-computer

interaction research, which breaks down digital media platforms into various sets of action possibilities, the purpose of this conceptual piece is to examine and expand the “ease of interface” principle to “favorable affordances” for the current media environment, and discuss new ways forward to theorize organization-public relationship building in the digital space.

30 Going beyond the dialogic theory, this conceptual piece also unpacks how the affordance theory can inform digital public relations research in general, and argues that examining public relations practice from the lens of affordances can enable cross-platform comparisons and provide platform-agnostic insights on how digital media affect our profession.

The essay is structured as follows. In the first section, we briefly review two camps of
35 public relations research on dialogic communication—one focusing on the enactment of dialogue as a relational orientation (originating from Kent & Taylor, 2002) and the other focusing on the principles for communication practice (originating from Kent & Taylor, 1998)—and differentiate them to provide some background for our arguments. In the second section, we explicate the problem this conceptual article tries to address—the incompatibility of
40 dialogic concepts with digital media. In the third section, we invoke the affordance theory and summarize how the affordance lens has been used in recent research to understand the role of information communication technologies (ICTs) in our digital lives. In the fourth section, we provide suggestions on how to incorporate affordances into the discussion of digital dialogue. In the last section, we articulate our ultimate goal of bringing affordance theory into the research
45 agenda of digital public relations.

Dialogue, Dialogic Communication, and Digital Dialogic Principles

Public relations scholars started writing about dialogue around the early 1990s (e.g., Pearson, 1989b), but the development of its formal theory mostly took place around the 2000s (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 2002). The concept of dialogue emphasizes the relational orientation of
50 communicative activities and is based on a different set of underlying philosophies from the

then-dominant paradigm of two-way symmetrical communication¹ (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). The proposal of the dialogic theory advanced the idea that, by building mutual understanding and promoting ethical communication between organizations and their publics, public relations practice could create dialogue as a product that contributes to beneficial relationships and social capital that are desirable for publics, organizations, and the general society (Kent & Lane, 2017; Taylor, 2011; Taylor & Kent, 2014). The ubiquity of the term “dialogue” at that time was seen as a signal of a paradigm shift in public relations, as scholars increasingly considered public relations as a communication tool for relationship negotiation rather than a mere management function.

Kent and Taylor (2002) contended that genuine dialogue followed the features of mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. *Mutuality* means that organizations and publics should collaborate with intersubjectivity and maintain a relationship with mutual equality; *propinquity* addresses the rhetorical process of dialogic exchanges, and contends that organizations and publics should consult each other before decision making; *empathy* alludes to the atmosphere of support and trust that is a requirement for successful dialogic communication between organizations and publics; *risk* denotes the unpredictability of dialogic communication and the vulnerability of organizations and publics as dialogic entities; and *commitment* refers to organizations’ and publics’ commitment to their relationship, conversations, and interpretations, which oftentimes requires physical resources devoted by each party.

Therefore, dialogue—the somewhat abstract concept rooted in moral philosophy, interpersonal communication, and rhetoric literature (e.g., Buber, 1970; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Stewart, 1978)—is an orientation and should be considered an ideal that guides ethical public relations practice, although it might be difficult or even impossible to achieve the ideal in the real world (e.g., Botan, 1997; Cizek, 2020; Lane & Bartlett, 2016; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012). The word *orientation* usually refers to a person’s interest, opinion, and belief in a

¹ The model of two-way symmetrical communication has since been updated to characterize various dimensions of public relations behaviors (cf. Grunig, 2001; Huang, 2001, 2004; Rhee, 2002; Sha, 2007, 2009).

particular topic (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). In our context, *orientation* refers to an organization's relational tendency to and belief in establishing an ethical public communication program and achieve mutual understanding with its publics (cf. Taylor & Kent, 2014). Dialogic communication, accordingly, refers to communication practice that carries dialogic orientations
80 and builds and sustains dialogues between organizations and their publics.

Along with the conceptual development, in another article (Kent & Taylor, 1998), these authors also drafted five digital dialogic principles that they argued could help online relationship building between organizations and publics, on one hand to help scholars empirically examine possible traits of dialogic communication, and on the other hand to address
85 the increasing use of the World Wide Web for public relations. The word *principle* means a rule or code of conduct (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Practice that does not follow those tangible rules will be seen as "against the principle." In our context, the term *principle* refers to the (five) rules that practitioners should follow and against which their content creation should be benchmarked (see Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018). The five principles are: (a) *dialogic loops*, which refer
90 to the use of communication channels through which organizations ask for opinions, solicit feedback, and address questions from their publics; (b) *useful information*, which requires organizations to provide valuable information that is wanted by their publics; (c) *return visit generation* and (d) *visitor conservation*, which refer to communication strategies that encourage repeated visits and keep visitors on-site for a longer time; and (e) *ease of interface*, which taps
95 into the technical aspect of dialogic communication and suggests that websites should be easy to navigate and user-friendly.

However, the dialogic public relations theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002) should not be conflated with the five digital dialogic principles (Kent & Taylor, 1998) analyzed by numerous studies throughout the years (see Ao & Huang, 2020; McAllister-Spooner, 2009; Wirtz &
100 Zimbres, 2018, for summaries). The five principles—dialogic loops, useful information, visitor conservation, return visit generation, and ease of interface—are merely communication strategies suggested for organizations to use on the Internet. Online communication that fulfills

these five principles is not necessarily dialogic communication, and digital dialogic communication does not have to fulfill all of these five principles.

105 As later critiqued by the original authors and others, the five digital dialogic principles spawned the “fairly common functionalist orientations toward dialogue” (Kent & Lane, 2017, p. 572), and it is time to consider the 2002 article as a theoretical revision to the 1998 proposal and move forward the development of dialogue as a public relations theory instead of online communication rules (Lane, 2018). The word *theory* here means a set of implicit and explicit
110 assumptions to interpret and evaluate empirical evidence (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Kuhn, 2010), and the dialogic theory refers to the normative assumptions in public relations research that organization-public communication is the most ethical when it resembles the relational nature of interpersonal dialogue. Given that publications on how organizations use digital dialogic principles on websites and social media platforms clearly outnumber those devoted to the
115 theoretical development of dialogue, it is indeed unfortunate that a set of strategies for digital practice—proposed at the dawn of the Internet age to recognize its potential for relationship building—overshadowed theoretical arguments about genuine dialogue and stifled the development of the dialogic theory in public relations research (e.g., Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018).

120 Nonetheless, guided by these five communication principles, researchers have contributed a huge amount to our understanding of how digital public relations practice has been carried out by professionals. Their empirical assessments seem to reach the consensus that organizational communication on digital outlets, such as websites, Facebook, and Twitter, did not utilize the full potential of these platforms for potential dialogic communication. For
125 instance, Lovejoy et al. (2012) found that, although nonprofit organizations were utilizing hyperlinks, hashtags, retweets, and other communication tools to engage with publics, the sampled organizations mostly used Twitter as a one-way communication channel, with little evidence of using dialogic features or building relationships. These researchers’ studies—mostly content analyses of organizations’ websites and social media posts—constitute such a large

130 portion of existing knowledge of digital public relations that it would be remiss to neglect this
body of literature and the original five dialogic principles, if we are about to discuss the
implications of affordances for digital public relations research. Therefore, in the following
sections, we divide our discussions into two separate but interrelated arguments about how the
affordance framework can help public relations researchers grapple with difficult questions
135 regarding both the dialogic theory and the five digital dialogic principles.

In short, the five digital dialogic principles are practical suggestions made by Kent and
Taylor (1998) that could be helpful for the enactment of genuine dialogues between
organizations and their publics theorized by Kent and Taylor (2002). Or as Sommerfeldt and
Yang (2018) simply put it, dialogue is a *promise*, while dialogic communication is the procedural
140 steps and communicative conduct that fulfills and precedes that promise; and the five digital
dialogic principles are a set of suggested strategies to build dialogues in the specific setting of
the World Wide Web.

The current essay argues that the affordance theory developed in psychology and
popularized by the literature in sociology and computer-mediated communication has profound
145 implications for all these dialogic concepts and the general field of digital public relations, and
that using the affordance framework can help release some tension between the term “dialogue”
and “digital” which will be discussed in the following section. In Table 1, we summarize our
arguments for easy reference.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

150 **Interrogating the Compatibility of Dialogic Concepts with Digital Media**

In the previous section, we summarized two camps of public relations research that
employed the dialogic vocabulary, the first concerning the philosophical discussion on what
organization-public dialogue means (i.e., dialogue and dialogic communication) and the second
concerning the best practice of building (potential) dialogue on the World Wide Web (i.e., digital
155 dialogic principles). In the next two subsections, we interrogate the applicability of those

dialogic concepts in the digital media context, and argue that the recent development of ICTs has created several compatibility issues between digital media and both research traditions.

Dialogue and Dialogic Communication with Digital Media

The incompatibility of dialogic communication—the communication practice that builds
160 and sustains dialogues between organizations and publics and that features the orientation of risk, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment—with digital media stems from the fact that dialogue is a concept deeply rooted in interpersonal communication and that dialogic communication as an ideal for public relations ethics was initially modeled for face-to-face practice (e.g., Buber, 1970; Pearson, 1989a). Dialogue from its very beginning was not theorized
165 for computer-mediated communication, and to adapt the concept for the digital age, we need new theoretical frameworks.

Some scholars, when reviewing studies that conflated dialogue with digital dialogic principles, have argued that it might be completely unsuitable to discuss dialogue and dialogic communication in the context of digital media. For example, Kent and Theunissen (2016)
170 provided a pessimistic view of enacting dialogue through social media. Since YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram do not provide sufficient reciprocal self-disclosure that is a requirement for dialogue, Kent and Theunissen (2016) argued that dialogue might not be even possible on these channels. Just as suggested by its title—*Elegy for Mediated Dialogue*, Kent and Theunissen's (2016) critique seems to claim that “mediated dialogue” is a self-contradictory concept, that
175 there is no way out of the conflict between genuine dialogue and computer-mediated communication, and that researchers should not talk about dialogue in studies on social media or other digital public relations topics.

In response, we offer two arguments, on one hand to engage in the continuing scholarly debate on dialogue and computer-mediated communication, and on the other hand to set the
180 stage for our central argument of incorporating affordance theory into the discussed public relations paradigm.

First, the absence of dialogue on social media is not a sufficient reason to cease the

scholarly discussion about dialogue in digital space. Dialogues between organizations and publics are hard to find, not only in online settings, but also in offline practice. For example, drawing from interviews with Australian professionals, Lane and Bartlett (2016) found that features of dialogue did not usually take place in the non-digital, physical world, an example being that the empathy required by dialogue was hard for practitioners to communicate when the stakeholder refused to be respectful. Similarly, Ciszek (2020) focused on LGBTQ publics in organizational communication, and concluded that dialogues with historically marginalized publics such as sexual minorities require trust as a precursor, which in turn needs substantial organizational investment beforehand to build cultural competency and authenticity. These institutional and interpersonal limitations inhibited offline practice from achieving the best possible outcomes of dialogue. However, these scholars substantially contributed to the development of the dialogic theory by asking *why* dialogue does not take place in these face-to-face settings. In the same vein, we argue, instead of repeatedly asserting that dialogue is impossible on social media platforms and altogether rejecting attempts at dialogue on digital media, scholars should ask *why* dialogue does not take place in these digital settings.

Second, dialogue, as reviewed earlier, is an ideal or a promise that guides the practice of public relations as a set of communication ethics. In other words, the dialogic theory should be considered as a normative theory, instead of a positive theory (Kent & Li, 2020). The lack of empirical evidence of digital dialogue, we argue, thus calls for inquiries on what types of digital actions bring public relations practice *closer* to the ideal outcome of dialogue. Other than the lack of education for practitioners (Lane, 2018) and the power imbalance of organizational communication (Russmann & Lane, 2020) commonly cited as reasons for dialogue's absence, we believe some of digital media's *inherent* attributes have also been playing a role. Our observation suggests that the effect of digital media infrastructure on organization-public dialogue has not been carefully and systematically examined by extant literature. In other words, the incompatibility of dialogue and dialogic communication with digital media can be, at least partially, attributed to some characteristics of digital media, and public relations scholars

are recommended to use theoretical frameworks in computer-mediated communication to address this incompatibility.

Tension between theories and practice creates opportunities for the entry of new conceptual frameworks, and we argue that the inherent incompatibility of dialogue and dialogic communication with digital media is one such tension. To address this tension, researchers need insights from other fields that have not (yet) been extensively referenced by public relations scholarship, such as computer-mediated communication and human-computer interaction (cf. Pang et al., 2018). By examining this tension both critically and empirically with interdisciplinary inquiries, scholars can improve the dialogic theory's compatibility with, and provide more concrete suggestions for, the increasingly digital practice of public relations. In later sections, we provide one of the first attempts at addressing this tension, by considering how different affordances of digital media affect the enactment of dialogue. Moreover, we believe that the discussion of digital dialogue provides possibilities for public relations researchers to contribute in turn to the development of digital media theories at large.

Digital Dialogic Principles with Digital Media

The incompatibility of digital dialogic principles—dialogic loops, useful information, visitor conservation, return visit generation, and ease of interface—with digital media manifests itself by the fact that the “ease of interface” principle appears to have been largely ignored by extant scholarship.

Kent and Taylor (1998) initially devised the five principles for the Web 1.0 era, which was characterized by the monopoly of power in content creation with website communication representing its notable features (see Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). At that time, the majority of organizational stakeholders simply visited a website address and consumed information designed by the organization's website programmers. In contrast, the concept of Web 2.0, proposed in the mid-2000s (cf. O'Reilly, 2005) and enabled by new programming technologies such as JavaScript (Allen, 2013), arrived far later than Kent and Taylor (1998). Though the term Web 2.0 and its relationship with Web 1.0 are constantly contested (e.g., Allen,

2008), it is mostly agreed upon that Web 2.0 is distinct with its democratic and social nature by enabling mass participation from all Internet users, prominent examples being social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Barassi & Treré, 2012; Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 240 2008; Jarrett, 2008). This development of communication technology is particularly interesting for the practice of dialogic communication because it enables publics to voice their opinions on organizations in interactive platforms and seems to grant more communicative power to stakeholders that were not represented previously in website communication. Accordingly, scholars have been trying to adapt the five principles of digital dialogic communication to their 245 studies situated in the Web 2.0 era. However, it is exactly during this adapting time that the “ease of interface” principle gradually lost its relevance, evident in scholars’ operationalization strategies of the five principles.

When examining digital dialogic principles on the World Wide Web, scholars mostly used content analyses and counted dialogic features on organizations’ websites (Wirtz & 250 Zimbres, 2018). For example, Taylor et al. (2001) analyzed activist organizations’ relationship-building strategies on websites with a 32-item questionnaire that coded the occurrences of dialogic features. The “ease of interface” principle was operationalized by four items in their study, each capturing whether the website displayed a site map, had major links to the rest of the site, incorporated a search engine box, and had minimal reliance on graphics. 255 This set of operationalizations was adopted by later studies on the use of dialogic principles in website communication (e.g., Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007).

When examining digital dialogic principles on social media, scholars clearly had some struggles adapting these principles. One of the earliest studies looked at Fortune 500 companies’ stakeholder engagement on Twitter (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010). To examine the use of dialogic 260 principles in Twitter profiles and individual tweets, the researchers gauged organizations’ implementation of “dialogic loops” by evaluating their responsiveness to user requests, and “useful information,” “visitor conservation,” and “return visit generation” by coding links and media content presented in their tweets, with later articles following this operationalization on

Twitter, WeChat, and other social media platforms (e.g., Qu, 2020; Yue et al., 2019).

265 One major defect of this operationalization is the neglect of the “ease of interface” principle. Starting from Rybalko and Seltzer’s (2010) study on Twitter, scholars appear to have completely discarded the principle from their studies (e.g., Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Linvill et al., 2012; Men et al., 2018; Watkins, 2017), as noted by Wirtz and Zimbres’s (2018) review. Admittedly, studies focusing on one single platform do not require careful examinations of the
270 platform’s action possibilities, because the social media interface will remain the same across users and throughout the studied time period. But the seeming irrelevance of the “ease of interface” principle is concerning, to say the least, and it is not helping scholars theorize digital public relations or helping practitioners understand the influence of communication technology on their work.

275 “Ease of interface” might fit well with the Web 1.0 era, back when public communication on official websites was not always user-friendly. But two decades later, websites have been designed to near perfection, and malfunctions are much less likely to happen, but different platforms (e.g., official websites, social media sites, etc.) still have dramatically different user experiences that are affecting the practice of dialogic communication in the digital space.
280 Facebook, for instance, seems to be a better social media platform to fulfill the dialogic loop principle than Twitter (e.g., Briones et al., 2011), and there is accumulating evidence showing that the differences of organizations’ communication practices across platforms might stem from the platforms themselves (e.g., Auger, 2013).

We thus argue that these cross-platform differences and nuances brought by emerging
285 media cannot be reduced to an issue caused by mere *interface*, and the “ease of interface” principle apparently falls short of a meaningful suggestion for public relations practice. Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) shared the same viewpoint in a recent special issue on digital dialogic communication theory:

Many studies utilizing the principles choose to simply omit the “ease of interface”
290 principle, as digital platforms like Facebook and Twitter provide the same interface

for all users. A substantial extension of dialogic communication theory might, therefore, come from a deeper consideration of the unique characteristics of the social media communication context and their match or mismatch with dialogic principles ... In any case, scholars should begin to question the applicability of the principles to the social media environment, and adapt—or even remake—they accordingly. (p. 61)

We echo this view and argue that the moot “ease of interface” principle should be expanded to deliver a contemporary understanding of digital dialogic communication’s technical requirements, and its decreasing relevance in recent studies is inviting new proposals that go beyond existing theoretical frameworks in public relations. Responding to Sommerfeldt and Yang’s (2018) call to address the incompatibility between the digital dialogic communication principles and the current digital media context, we provide a conceptual expansion of the “ease of interface” principle to “favorable affordances,” as explained in the following sections.

Affordance Theory

The theoretical framework of affordances was initially developed by James J. Gibson (1979) for an interactionist view of perception and action in ecological psychology (Greeno, 1994). While reviewing and summarizing Gibson’s work, Greeno (1994) defined affordances as a property of the environment that interacts with agents in such a way that activities can be supported. Evans et al.’s (2017) interpretation was more straightforward: an affordance means “an action possibility available in the environment” (p. 37).

The concept of affordances has been adapted into many other disciplines, especially product design and human-computer interaction. Communication scholars have used the term “affordances” to illustrate the distinguished and socially constructed characteristics of various communication channels and to examine the effects of their interactive features on human communication. For example, generally speaking, portable technologies and mobile communication are affording flows of information free from geographical restrictions, and social media are affording interactive and networked communication behaviors that could not

be realized before (e.g., Campbell, 2013; Humphreys, 2007). More empirically in the literature on organizations, Fulk and Yuan (2013) connected affordance theory and knowledge sharing literature, and they argued that enterprise social networking systems could afford better social connections, create and sustain social capital, and improve knowledge sharing among employees. Treem and Leonardi (2013) compared social media with other workplace communication technologies, such as emails, instant messaging, and teleconferencing, and concluded that social media afforded better organizational communication with higher levels of visibility, editability, persistence, and association.

As platform affordances are granting organizations and individuals *abilities* to commit certain communicative actions, there also comes the discussion of platforms' *constraints* and the consequent *inabilities*. One notable example of social media's affordance constraints is the character limit set by Twitter, where users were unable to post tweets longer than 140 characters. Studies have found that the constraint limited the possibility of in-depth political deliberation (Jaidka et al., 2019), thorough user self-presentation (Evans et al., 2017), and engaging organizational communication (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). However, constraints are not necessarily negative for mediated communication. In fact, constraints can sometimes grant distinguished characteristics to media platforms, and contribute to their commercial success. For example, messages disappear after a few seconds on Snapchat, which indeed is a constraint, but it makes the platform unique and popular among millennials (McCormick, 2021). Some recent publications have also argued that constraints can encourage individual creativity and improve content quality (e.g., Gligorić et al., 2018; Joyce, 2009).

Some public relations scholars have implicitly used the concept of *affordances* in their studies. For example, in a review of literature on organizational social media use, Paek et al. (2013) concluded that "practitioners are not taking full advantage of the interactive and dialogic capabilities afforded by new media platforms" (p. 527). The phrase "interactive and dialogic capabilities" is close to the meaning of affordances. However, the concept is still largely scant in published public relations scholarship, and it has not been extensively discussed in regard to the

theory of dialogue or the practice of dialogic communication.

We believe a critical assessment of how different affordances interact to regulate individuals' and organizations' action possibilities on digital media platforms and how they positively or negatively affect communication outcomes can inform theory building in public relations. Moreover, the relational outcome of communication actions, which is paramount to public relations research, has been left unattended by previous digital media scholarship. By studying how affordances affect dialogic outcomes (i.e., the communication of the risk, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment orientations) and dialogic principles (i.e., dialogic loops, useful information, visitor conservation, and return visit generation), public relations scholars can not only have a deeper understanding of how dialogue works (or why dialogue does not work) on digital media platforms, but also inform the general digital media scholarship by providing insights on how affordances affect relationship building.

Suggestions from an Affordance Perspective of Dialogic Communication

In the next two subsections, we provide further discussions on how to use the affordance theory to examine dialogic concepts. In the first subsection, in response to Kent and Theunissen (2016), we specify how the affordance perspective provides new insights to dialogic public relations theory (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and how scholars can push the field forward with empirical studies that incorporate the affordance theory. In the second subsection, in response to Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018), we propose a conceptual expansion of the "ease of interface" dialogic principle (Kent & Taylor, 1998) to "favorable affordances," argue that it provides a more complete and critical understanding of how affordances affect digital public relations, and encourage practitioners to assess affordances of emerging digital media platforms before utilizing them for public relations purposes.

Communicating Dialogic Orientations with Digital Media Affordances

We argue that the enactment of dialogue in the online space requires certain kinds of digital media affordances. However, what affordances help enact digital dialogue and what affordances inhibit it remain open questions, and public relations scholars are particularly

equipped and suited to answer these research questions at the intersection of digital technology and relationship building.

In a scale development study, Fox and McEwan (2017) considered media affordances in terms of their social functions in human communication and proposed a typology of affordances commonly found in real-world digital channels: accessibility, bandwidth, social presence, privacy, network association, personalization, persistence, editability, conversation control, and anonymity. Inquiring which affordance or subset of affordances, among the proposed ten, facilitates the communication of risk, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment could be a good start to incorporating affordance theory into digital public relations research.

It should be noted that the literature on digital media affordances is still nascent, and that proposals of its typology are bound to be contested. For example, Evans et al. (2017) argued that privacy should not be considered an affordance, and Sundar (2008) contested another typology—consisting of modality, agency, interactivity, and navigability—to explain why digital media platforms cue cognitive heuristics differently. The typology of affordances is beyond the scope of this current essay and will remain an open debate, as communication technology evolves and new affordances get proposed to theorize digital media's effects on communication outcomes.

One critical advantage of using the affordance framework to empirically examine the enactment of digital dialogue, compared to other approaches such as the channel repertoire approach (e.g., O'Sullivan, 2000; Park et al., 2019; Schultz et al., 2011; Sommerfeldt et al., 2019; Yuan, 2011), is that the affordance approach is platform agnostic and easily applicable to different digital media channels currently employed in public relations practice. In other words, the framework focuses on the communicative properties of digital media, rather than its technical aspects (cf. Carr, 2020). Thus, empirical insights on the effect of one affordance on relationship building can be applied to multiple digital channels with that specific affordance, which can contribute to our *general* understanding of how digital media affects organization-public relational efforts such as dialogic communication, rather than our

knowledge about one *specific* communication channel.

400 For example, Kent and Theunissen (2016) proposed the idea that self-disclosure might be a requirement for forming relationships and building dialogues. By employing the affordance framework and empirically testing if anonymity, the opposite of self-disclosure, inhibits the communication of dialogic orientations (e.g., empathy and propinquity) through experiments or survey studies, scholars might be able to generalize their findings and test the hypothesis that
405 existing communication channels that afford anonymity will all curb the enactment of dialogue. Similarly, the requirement of physical presence in dialogue (Kent & Theunissen, 2016) corresponds to the social presence affordance, mentioned multiple times by public relations scholars but outside of the affordance framework (e.g., Men et al., 2018). Though social presence might never amount to the normative requirement of physical presence drafted by moral
410 philosophers on dialogue, we believe how the level of social presence afforded by digital channels takes organization-public interactions *closer* to or *further* from organization-public dialogue is still a worthy question to ask, in order to understand the role of new media technology in public relations. By empirically establishing that, for instance, social presence facilitates the communication of mutuality and risk, we can better pinpoint why video
415 conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom and Skype) should be used to achieve the dialogic ideal during organizational crises. By studying how media affordances influence these relational outcomes, we can also inform the design of new media technologies, such as how we should program intelligent organizational tools (e.g., chatbots) for public communication purposes.

In other words, instead of making platform-specific claims (e.g., Twitter is not dialogic;
420 Kent and Lane, 2017), we encourage scholars to delve more deeply into the question of *why* dialogue does not emerge on digital platforms, ask *what* properties of the studied platform make it dialogic or not dialogic, and attribute the answer to affordances—the building blocks of digital media pertaining to their action possibilities. We believe these affordance-based findings will provide more theoretical insights about the role of information technology in dialogic
425 communication than those platform-specific claims presented by existing literature.

In fact, employing the scale developed by Fox and McEwan (2017), scholars have started explicitly examining affordances in organizational settings that are of great interest to public relations scholars, and these studies have yielded theoretical insights that can be applied to multiple digital channels. By experimentally manipulating participants' perceived levels of
430 anonymity and visibility, Mao and DeAndrea (2019) evaluated the effects of the two affordances on employees' intention to voice work-related concerns, and found that these two affordances can significantly alter employee behavior through their influences on channel safety and individual efficacy. Though the main finding is confirmative and intuitive, their study also found counterintuitive results, such as the visibility affordance decreased individual efficacy,
435 which opened up new space for future research on the causal effect of affordances in employee communication.

Similarly, scholars working in the field of digital public relations can connect the social affordance scale with measurements on dialogic communication (e.g., Romenti et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2015) and investigate these affordances' (and their interactive) effects on relational
440 outcomes. While much digital media scholarship has theorized or examined outcomes such as psychological perceptions, organizational resources, political representation, civic engagement, and online discussions (e.g., Deseriis, 2021; Jaidka et al., 2019; Lelkes, 2020; Rice et al., 2017; Wohn et al., 2016) affordances' effects on relationship building have been largely unattended. We believe this lacuna presents itself as a great opportunity for public relations scholarship to
445 contribute back to the general study of digital media effects.

There are two other advantages of using affordances to examine digital dialogue. First, the theoretical framework is a promising candidate for a general theory of emerging media, as it has been successfully employed to dissect media effects spawned by newly developed technologies, such as virtual reality and augmented reality (e.g., Barreda-Ángeles et al., 2021;
450 Scholz & Smith, 2016; Steffen et al., 2019). Using a somewhat future-proof concept to understand the influence of communication technology on dialogue can provide more theoretical consistency throughout the literature. Second, the term is ubiquitous across fields

that are related to public relations, not only in the communication literature referenced above, but also in fields such as management, marketing, and information systems (e.g., Anderson & Robey, 2017; Argyris & Monu, 2015; De Luca et al., 2021; Leidner et al., 2018; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). By using the same theoretical framework, public relations scholarship can better engage with the wider social science literature.

In summary of this section, we encourage scholars to examine the mediated communication of dialogic orientations (i.e., mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment) through the lens of affordances, in order to address the incompatibility between the normative theory of dialogue and the increasingly digital practice of public relations. How a normative theory—developed to conceptualize offline practice ideals—can be adapted for a digital world has presented many challenges for communication scholars. Just like how the literature on political deliberation is getting adapted to accommodate digital channels with the affordance framework (e.g., Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Jaidka et al., 2019; Maia & Rezende, 2016; Rossini, 2020), we contend that public relations scholars should also start speaking the language of affordances and examining the effect of digital media channels on the communication of dialogic ideals with this platform-agnostic approach.

From “Ease of Interface” to “Favorable Affordances”: A Conceptual Expansion

In light of the decreasing relevance of the “ease of interface” dialogic principle in the Web 2.0 era, we propose using “favorable affordances” instead to help practitioners assess the action possibilities of media channels and reevaluate their digital dialogic communication practice.

“Ease of interface” is a part of “favorable affordances,” which incorporates all facets of the human-computer interaction in digital dialogic communication. Interface is a small part of the affordance framework, incorporated as the “accessibility” affordance in Fox and McEwan’s (2017) typology. Without ease of interface, a particular platform must not have the affordances needed to provide smooth experiences for dialogic communication to materialize. But the ease of interface does not necessarily translate to the platform having a favorable condition for the conduct of dialogic communication.

As previously discussed, platforms in the Web 2.0 era offer organizations the same set of features and interfaces, and organizations build upon them to communicate and build relationships with publics. It is indeed how organizations utilize these features (i.e., the other four digital dialogic principles), rather than whether the interface is easy to use, that is yielding different public relations outcomes. By conceptually expanding the “ease of interface” principle to “favorable affordances” and considering it as the technical requirement for digital dialogic communication, we believe our model—“dialogic principles for mediated communication” as visualized in Figure 1—provides more-relevant suggestions to the real-world practice of public relations. In line with the original authors’ intent of guiding communication strategies (cf. Kent & Taylor, 1998), we deliver this conceptual expansion as a long-overdue revision to the dialogic principles that no longer fit the current media landscape.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

This conceptual expansion is needed to equip practitioners with the necessary knowledge to differentiate popular social media platforms for organizational purposes, which the “ease of interface” principle fails to do. For example, the three major social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit—all have interfaces that are easy to use, and following the “ease of interface” principle does not contribute any meaningful understanding to why these platforms differ in their outcomes. Instead, examining dialogic communication practices with a “favorable affordances” principle, practitioners and scholars can have a better understanding of how these platforms’ affordances lead to different digital experiences. Facebook, with its high social presence and network association affordances and low anonymity affordance, offers organizations a better chance to execute “return visit generation” and create close-knit communities through repeated interactions (e.g., Kim et al., 2014; Shin et al., 2015). Twitter’s low personalization, bandwidth, and editability affordances make it suitable as a broadcasting tool for organizations, where “useful information” is paramount for eliciting interactions and building relationships that go beyond clicks and likes (e.g., Watkins, 2017; Yue et al., 2019). Reddit, with its high conversation control and persistence affordances, uses discussion posts as

its content units and can hold in-depth conversations between organizations and their online publics (e.g., Le & Mao, 2018). Though understudied in public communication research, the Reddit platform seems to easily fulfill the “dialogic loops” principle since organizations can
510 readily engage in back-and-forth conversations with stakeholders, but also exposes organizations to more risks and manipulations due to its high bandwidth affordance (see Gaudette et al., 2021).

Due to its nature of being the precedent of digital public relations practice, we place the “favorable affordances” principle as the base of the new model, in a way to inform practitioners
515 that platform opportunities should be critically gauged as the technical requirement for dialogic communication before the stage of communication strategy development.

The point is, to conduct digital dialogic communication and thus foster dialogue in the contemporary media environment, “ease of interface” is a minimum requirement, not an ideal principle. The ideal principle should be that the digital platform, chosen by practitioners to host
520 dialogic communication, should provide favorable affordances to support such organizational efforts. Different affordances can invoke different communication behavior, and it is time to reconsider the principle and equip practitioners with the knowledge of affordances to help them understand the role of technology in their practice. We believe the conceptual expansion delivers a better framework for the digital age, not only for websites and social media, but also
525 for newer communication technologies yet to come.

Implications of Affordances for Other Areas in Public Relations Research

Authentic dialogic communication is crucial to building mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and publics (Kent & Taylor, 2018). Although dialogic communication does not necessarily need to be mediated by communication technology, we
530 cannot ignore the fact that digital public relations practice is fast-growing and much of what we do today has been mediated.

We have so far identified and reviewed the struggle of adapting dialogic concepts to the current media landscape, and we have discussed how the affordance framework can improve

the theoretical development of dialogue as a public relations theory and can inform the practical suggestions of dialogic principles as communication strategies. From a normative standpoint, it seems that mediated communication can never lead to genuine dialogue and that “digital dialogue” is a self-contradictory concept. Yet, fixating on this tension overshadows promising research directions—if digital dialogue cannot take place, why so? Instead of claiming that the dialogic theory no longer applicable to digital contexts, a change of direction may solicit new conceptual development that is necessary to characterize and theorize contemporary public relations practice. The lens of affordances, in our quest to further understand dialogue in today’s technology-mediated environment, is the vantage point direly needed to not only renew and expand the dialogic theory, but also unpack opportunities in many public relations research areas. This essay’s ultimate goal, despite its heavy focus on dialogue, is to bring the affordance theory into the general agenda of digital public relations research.

First and foremost, affordances can help to further research at the intersection of digital media and crisis communication. For example, scholars recently have renewed their interests in a repertoire approach to study how channel choices affect crisis communication effectiveness (e.g., Liu et al., 2019; Park et al., 2019; Schultz et al., 2011). So far, these studies have been limited to the platforms chosen by the researchers, and they have rarely touched upon the fundamental differences among platforms that are yielding these results. By connecting the affordance measurement of each platform to crisis-relevant communication outcomes, an affordance approach with platform-comparison research designs can create valuable insights for theory development related to platforms/channels combination and choices in crises. Such research agendas also better reflect crisis communication practices in the real world, where a combination of channels and platforms is utilized.

Secondly, at the intersection of digital media and issue management, affordance theory also provides an excellent opportunity to understand why certain channels are preferred over others in certain circumstances, and what affordances are utilized in those circumstances to fulfill strategic purposes. Results from these studies can help theorize the accumulating

evidence on multi-platform digital media use in relationship building, in research areas such as nonprofit advocacy (e.g., Ihm, 2019), public diplomacy (e.g., Zhang, 2013), and corporate social responsibility (e.g., Reilly & Hynan, 2014). More importantly, as affordances constitute the underlying principles upon which certain channels are selected, insights from such research are evergreen and applicable to future emerging platforms, and they can be used to understand the temporal changes of digital strategic management efforts throughout issue stages (see Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2017), as well as how intended effects can be maximized based on platform affordances.

Finally, engagement is another quickly developing agenda in public relations research that can benefit from an affordance perspective, specifically as to what and how engagement outcomes can be achieved in socially mediated contexts (cf. Chewning, 2018; Johnston, 2018). The mediating digital technologies provide different action possibilities for engagement processes, which in turn translate to different engagement possibilities for organizations and stakeholders. Extending literature on socially mediated engagement, Xu and Xiong (2020) have proposed four parameters to further theorize engagement in digital contexts. These authors took notice of platform affordances, which affected moderation and control, typologies of networks, and degrees of participation and interactivity. The technical parameter discussed by Xu and Xiong (2020) resembles our model proposed in Figure 1, where affordance is the foundation upon which the meso-level factors determine the nature and outcomes of engagement.

The general theory of affordance is by no means promoting technological determinism, but it highlights the point that communication platforms' technical infrastructure is crucial to any mediated communication (e.g., Zhou, 2021), including digital dialogic communication. Previously, when scholars discussed dialogic communication, they mostly focused on the humanity side of the story. For example, real-world communication has power imbalances and time constraints (Lane & Bartlett, 2016; Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018), which usually lead to sub-optimal dialogue in the end (Lane, 2018). The affordance perspective focuses on the

infrastructure side of the story, in that digital dialogic communication, regardless of on which communication platform it takes place, is mediated by inhuman objects, and these inhuman
590 objects can affect dialogue. We encourage public relations scholars to start meaningful discussions on how to better understand the term “digital” in digital dialogic communication, and using the affordance framework for these inquiries, as we argue, is one of the preferred approaches.

Concluding Remarks

Affordance, an underlying principle affecting many facets of social media platforms and
595 mediated interactions, provides a promising framework to address extant tensions in public relations theories. We contend that the dialogic theory can still hold its relevance to today’s socially mediated landscape, once it receives some overdue re-examinations informed by interdisciplinary insights based on affordances. The shift from “ease of interface” to “favorable
600 affordances” not only is a needed expansion of the dialogic principles, but also signals a new way forward to consider the possibility of communicating dialogic orientations digitally. On a grand scale, affordance theory also presents new directions to further theorize digital public relations, particularly related to cross-platforms adaptation and utilization, an emerging area in public relations research that acknowledges and emphasizes the benefits of engaging various
605 (mediated) communication channels to achieve strategic purposes.

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Table 1

Dialogic Concepts Examined from the Lens of Affordances

Term	Type	Definition	Key References	Inquiries from an Affordance Perspective
Dialogue	Orientations	A communicative orientation that features risk, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment.	Buber (1970) Stewart (1978) Pearson (1989a, 1989b) Kent & Taylor (2002) Heath et al. (2006) Theunissen & Wan Noordin (2012)	- What affordances support and impede the communication of risk, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment?
Dialogic Communication	Practice with orientations	Communication practice that builds and sustains dialogues between organizations and publics.	Yang et al. (2015) Buchanan-Oliver & Fitzgerald (2016) Lane & Bartlett (2016) Ciszek & Logan (2018)	- What affordances support and impede relationship building through digital channels? - Do affordances interact to affect relational outcomes of digital public relations practice?
Digital Dialogic Principles	Principles for practice	Dialogic Loops Useful Information Visitor Conservation Return Visit Generation Ease of Interface	Kent & Taylor (1998) McAllister-Spooner (2009) Wirtz & Zimbres (2018) Ao & Huang (2020)	- Construct platform-agnostic dialogic principles - Conceptual update of the “ease of interface” principle - Critical assessment of platform uses in digital public relations practice from an affordance perspective

Figure 1
The Construction of Dialogic Principles for Mediated Communication

A. Dialogic Principles (Kent & Taylor, 1998)

B. Conceptual Expansion of the “Ease of Interface” Principle

C. Repositioning the “Favorable Affordances” Principle

Note: Panel A shows the original dialogic principles proposed by Kent and Taylor (1998). Panel B shows the current article’s conceptual expansion of the “ease of interface” principle to “favorable affordances.” Panel C shows the current article’s repositioning of the “favorable affordances” principle to indicate that favorable affordances constitute the technical foundation for digital dialogic communication practice, and that platform affordances should be critically gauged before the stage of communication strategy development.