



Muzzling social media: The adverse effects of moderating stakeholder conversations online

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ABSTRACT

Many organizations struggle to meaningfully engage with their stakeholders on political, societal and environmental topics via social media. Often such discourses unravel into splintered and negative conversations, raising the question whether organizations can and should exercise some level of control and 'steering' in these conversations and, if so, how stakeholders would react to such 'top down' moderation. Existing studies lack empirical insights into the impacts of different levels of moderation in social media conversations on stakeholder attitudes. Two experimental studies were developed to test the effect of different levels of organizational moderation on stakeholder attitudes towards organizations. We show that increased levels of moderation negatively affect attitudes towards an organization, satisfaction with an organization's performance, and trust in the organization. Increased moderation also significantly undermines beliefs in the commitment of the organization to its stakeholders and control mutuality. This paper extends recent qualitative attempts to build new theory around stakeholder dialogues on social media by testing the effects of varying levels of moderation in such dialogues.

1. Introduction

In early November 2013 a social media campaign by the American Bank JPMorgan Chase went "horribly awry" [1]. In an attempt to engage with finance students on career-related questions, the bank had—under the hashtag #askJPM—set up a Twitter Q&A with vice chairman Jimmy Lee. However, within minutes, a vast number of Twitter users took the hashtag to voice diverse concerns against the bank, ranging from tax fraud to business dealings with Mexican drug cartels. Only hours later, when realizing the potential backlash and damage to its reputation, JPMorgan Chase felt pressured to cancel the campaign. They did so in a tweet that plainly reflects on their own failure to anticipate and manage stakeholder conversations online: "Tomorrow's Q&A is cancelled. Bad idea. Back to the drawing board." [2].

Social media fundamentally change how we communicate and interact—this goes for individuals [3–5] as much as for organizations, such as government agencies or companies [6–8]. Large organizations face particular challenges as their vast and diverse groups of stakeholders now seek to interact with them on various issues via different

online platforms—platforms such as Facebook or Twitter that are, in principle, very open and inclusive for organizations and global audiences to interact [9,10]. Specifically, when organizations attempt to engage with stakeholders online on social, political, and environmental topics, these engagements have often shown to rapidly unravel into splintered and negative conversations (see for instance Kopecki, 2013 and [11] for examples from Twitter). For organizations and stakeholders alike, this raises the question whether one should attempt to manage, moderate, or even limit the (topical and participatory) inclusivity that is, in large part, constitutive of these social media technologies. More specifically: How would organizations' attempts to actively moderate and steer conversations about social, political, and environmental topics online affect the attitudes of social media users?

Depending on the nature of a particular debate and the organizational reaction to it, understanding the effects of different *levels of moderation* (i.e., 'control and steering') on social media would help make organization-stakeholder dialogues via these platforms more effective and productive for all parties involved. Recent studies have argued for social, political, and environmental issues as particularly important

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topics to organization-stakeholder engagement via online media, and have begun to build new theory distinguishing between different modes of organizations' online dialogue strategies involving these topics [12]. In this context, the more open and 'non-staged' approaches generally aim for higher stakeholder engagement and are assumed to build positive stakeholder attitudes, which, in turn, are said to safeguard organizational legitimacy in the long term [13,14]. However, existing studies rarely model the outcomes of different engagement approaches via social media, and the literature that examines stakeholder engagement as legitimacy-seeking practice lacks empirical insights into the actual impacts of different strategic communication approaches on perceptions and attitudes of organizational stakeholders [15].

In this research, we empirically extend recent studies on stakeholder dialogues via social media. We use an experimental research design to study the effects of social media conversations on stakeholders. Specifically, we investigate how differences in the degree to which organizations moderate and control conversations on social media affect stakeholders' perceptions of the organization. We show how varying levels of moderation lead to different effects on stakeholder communication outcomes, namely, attitude, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality. While our results suggest that more openness and rather 'unguided' conversations will generally lead to more favorable stakeholder communication outcomes, we also posit in our discussion that, in cases of high issue complexity, a certain level of 'curation' may indeed be appreciated by stakeholders.

Our article contributes to the current debate by extending recent theory on different modes of online dialogue strategies about the social and environmental impact of organizations [12] by applying them in a model that focuses on effects of moderation strategies on relationship outcomes. As such, our research helps to shift the recent emphasis on identifying dialogic patterns in social media communication [12,16,17] toward studying the effects of different forms of social media dialogues (on social, political, and environmental topics) with stakeholders.

1.1. Organization-stakeholder interactions in the age of social media

While traditionally, stakeholder management has paid particular attention to primary stakeholders (such as employees, customers, or suppliers), social media have significantly strengthened the role of secondary stakeholders (such as related communities or the general public) [18]. Further, social media technology has made direct organization-stakeholder interactions on broader social, political, and environmental issues commonplace [16]. This socio-technological trend relates to a longer development starting in the 1960s by which organizations are increasingly pressured to address social, political, and environmental issues in order to provide more than merely an economic justification for their conduct (see e.g. [19] for a review). Such broader corporate social responsibility (CSR) is argued to "offer a remarkable long-term fiscal advantage" for organizations ([20]; p. 56). By actively communicating, not only about 'core business', but also about its societal and environmental impact more generally, organizations aspire to manage their reputations and gain legitimacy by co-creating norms of acceptable organizational behavior with their relevant stakeholders [15,21–27].

Perpetuated by institutional factors such as new communication technologies, new interaction norms, and a globalized economy, there has been a steady growth of outreach efforts to stakeholders on environmental, social and governance issues through online and offline channels [28–30]. Specifically, the probability of stakeholder interference has become more pronounced through social media, as more members of an organization are exposed to communication about the organization and engage in communication for the organization [26]. Since the advent of the Internet as social software has made networks more transparent, structural positions traditionally held by incumbent actors have become more open [31,32]. Unlike traditional media, which are relatively hierarchical and unidirectional in that messages are sent

from a sender to a receiver, social media technologies enable motivated individuals and organizations to create content and respond in new ways [10].

Online conversations that occur via social media can be understood as a constantly negotiated framework among actors who are embedded in networks of different, sometimes contradicting, possibilities and constraints [16]. Conflicting voices and moral pressure aimed at delegitimizing corporations enter the public debate and trigger pressure on the organization. Organizational outreach into social media should thus be understood as continuously emerging and changing in a dynamic, media-based interplay between several actors [9]. Organizations aim to leverage the social capital of these networks of actors and achieve a prominent structural position within them [33].

In constructing a typology, Illia et al. [12] established conversational and interactional features to distinguish different forms of online interaction and dialogue by organizations. Dialogue is based on collaboration and mutuality between the involved actors. Such mutuality creates propinquity among actors, leading to rhetorical exchange. Empathy and commitment nurture this exchange and imply a willingness to accept the outcome's risks. Based on their open results, dialogues are potentially harmful to participating parties. By entering into a dialogue, all parties acknowledge each other's vulnerability as a common basis for a respectful conversation [34]. Websites are potential platforms for such dialogues [35–39] and weblogs and social media—in theory—provide even greater potential for dialogue [38]. Forms of moderation, e.g., based on the dialogic principles "ease of interface" and "usefulness of information", influence the dialogic relationship with users or stakeholders [34]. Dimensions such as "generation of return visits" and "dialogic loops" are also used to describe the dialogic momentum of online conversations (Rybalko & Seltzer; [38,40].

In summary, social media allows stakeholders to enter or initiate the conversation on almost any issue. Thus, organizations must constantly and actively decide which conversations to enter, whom to engage and to what degree to interfere with, manage or control these conversations—all these activities can be summarized as moderation. However, such strategies remain empirically under-investigated in CSR contexts and their effects on stakeholders online, which could affect organizational legitimacy, remain largely unknown. In this research, we investigate how the degree to which organizations moderate online conversations about social and environmental issues affects stakeholder's perceptions of the organization. Specifically: How do different levels of moderation in online stakeholder dialogues affect stakeholder attitudes, commitment, and trust towards as well as satisfaction with the organization?

1.2. Controlled vs. crowdsourced: distinguishing levels of online moderation

In this research, we look specifically at styles of moderation as an essential feature of online stakeholder dialogues. Moderation, as such, describes the efforts of an organization to steer the conversation and its outcomes in some way. This understanding of moderation can be related to discussions on different types of communication. Earlier stakeholder outreach communication was often based on a one-way transmission model of communication as a tool for disseminating information about an organization's (allegedly positive) environmental, social and governance activities [106]. The communication was also more reactive, relied heavily on organizations' cost-benefit analyses and was rarely convincing for critical stakeholders [41,42]. Such models of mere information and one-way 'asymmetrical' communication represent low inclusivity and participation and very intense levels of steering and control. Accordingly, there have been calls for more authenticity and more participatory models of stakeholder communication [43,44].

In their overview, Morsing and Schultz [45] propose a stakeholder involvement strategy comprising frequent and systematic negotiation with stakeholders to explore mutually beneficial actions. In an age

where issue advocates can easily gain access to the public agenda, identifying interest groups, evaluating the validity of their demands and engaging in more open, two-way communication is increasingly important [29,46]. Such models of more two-way ‘symmetrical’ communication aim to foster understanding between an organization and its stakeholders [47,48].

In essence, asymmetrical communication is characterized by low inclusiveness and high moderation and control. The organization limits access to the conversation, directs its topics and maintains authority over ending engagements. Symmetrical forms of communication can inversely be understood as techniques that use high inclusiveness and low moderation. Typically, the efforts and resources necessary to enable symmetrical forms of communication are very high, and this technique is usually only employed for very critical issues and antagonistic conflicts [49].

Illia et al. [12] found that corporations that effectively engage in online dialogue with stakeholders use four different approaches: (1) directing conversations, (2) moderating conversations, (3) building open-script conversations, and (4) crowdsourcing conversations. Drawing on their research, we distinguish conversational logics for different levels of moderation.

Conversational logics of high moderation. High moderation is common in “directed conversations”, where only a few counterparts are allowed to converse, actors only have a voice within a selected framework and dissent is not allowed. Further, high moderation is typical for “moderated conversations” in which the organization sets the topic, keeps the conversation under control and is not open to dissent. Extreme examples of such conversations can be found, e.g., in the pharma industry, where companies are legally highly restricted and must be in control of exactly what is said. Such conversational styles are also typical for corporate social media sites (owned media) where critical issues are often deleted or framed very particularly. We refer to conversations with high levels of moderation as ‘controlled conversations’.

Conversational logics of low moderation. Low moderation is typical for “open script conversations” in which stakeholders are allowed to answer freely on predefined questions and dissent is theoretically possible. These strategies appear to be applied more often for special interest topics with rather low interest from the general public. Further, low moderation is common in “crowdsourced conversations” in which an organization’s influence is limited as a (potentially) large number of stakeholders set the topic and may lead the conversation. Such conversations can result in dissent and were found, e.g., in the context of the banking and telecommunications sector. Such interactions closely resemble ‘symmetrical’ forms of dialogue discussed above and are more rarely employed. High commitment from all actors is demanded to find a mutual solution. We refer to conversations with low levels of moderation as ‘crowdsourced conversations’.

Similar discussions on levels of moderation can also be found in the organizational communication literature. Barge and Little [50] describe dialogues as a form of collective thinking expressed through a singular, unified or blended voice. A *singular voice* is used in conversations when expert opinion is required to support an idea. This approach could be considered a form with high moderation, specifically involving low inclusiveness (low number of participants). A *unified voice* is used to show the determination of a group to ensure a single voice does not dominate, representing as well a form of high moderation but with relatively high inclusiveness. *Blended voices* include a variety of opinions (low moderation) and consist of a large circle of actors. Different levels of moderation allow for managing centripetal and centrifugal forces during conversations. Table 1 provides exemplars of extant streams of literature, their proposed conversation styles, and the related levels of moderation.

2. Model and hypotheses

Greenwood [51] notes that different communication styles

Table 1
Conversation styles and levels of moderation in different streams of literature.

Literature stream	Conversation style	Level of moderation
Public relations (e.g. [48])	Publicity	High
	Information	High
	Asymmetrical	High
	Symmetrical	Low
Corporate communication (e.g. [17])	Broadcasting	High
	Reacting	Low
	Engaging	High
Business ethics (e.g. [12])	Directing conversations	High
	Open script	Low
	Crowdsourcing	Low
	Moderating	High
Organizational communication (e.g. [50])	Singular voice	High
	Unified voices	High
	Blended voices	Low

essentially reflect varying moral treatments of stakeholders. ‘True and effective’ stakeholder outreach communication is an optimal level of engagement with an optimal level of stakeholder-enhanced responsibility based on symmetrical communication. Symmetrical communication implies that all parties or coalitions move from their dominant position toward mutual understanding. Thus, dialogue becomes an important organizational task as it provides a place for an organization and its stakeholders to negotiate a framework of mutual understanding. Recent research on dialogues in the context of CSR has examined the facilitators of dialogue [52], the functionality of dialogue for CSR reporting [53], and the outcomes and effectiveness of dialogue in CSR communication [54,55].

In this research, we extend on the typology of online communicative practices related to moderation [12,17,50] and elucidate their effects on stakeholder perceptions and attitudes. Specifically, we focus on the conversational logics identified by Illia et al. [12] as they relate to varying levels of moderation. Moderation, as specified in the section above, represents the level of organizational intervention in interacting with stakeholder messages via social media. We argue that such conversational logics (at least partially) reflect organizational stakeholder engagement policy, which is then also expressed through the degree of moderation of the conversation. Within our conceptual framework, and in accordance with Illia et al. [12], we propose that the “crowdsourced conversation” type represents the ‘truest’ form of dialogue due to its openness towards both participants and topics. The outcome of crowdsourced conversations is open and uncertain for all parties, hence, mutual vulnerability acts as a basis for and facilitator of the dialogue. We further assert inversely that the approach of highly moderated “controlled conversations” negatively impacts the perception of the organization.

As dependent factors, we focus on commonly discussed outcomes of stakeholder outreach communication, particularly derived from the CSR literature [56]. The effects of such communication can be coarsely divided into internal and external outcomes and exist on three basic levels: organization, stakeholder, and issue [57]. In this paper, we focus on outcomes on the organizational and stakeholder levels. On the organizational level, attitude and trust are relevant internal outcomes of outreach communication [23,40]. These dimensions are held as the antecedents for external stakeholder behavior. Attitude summarizes the emotional (favorable) relationship with an organization based on environmental, social, and governance activities and the stakeholder’s awareness of it. If the public expresses positive attitudes towards an organization it implies that an organization maintains a generally positive image in the eyes of its stakeholders. More informed stakeholders are more likely to have positive attitudes [58]; hence, organizations that are open to dialogue are in a better position to create favorable attitudes towards their organization. Thus, we propose:

H1. High moderation has a negative effect on attitude toward the organization.

Further, different communication styles on social media may affect stakeholder trust [59]. Trust is described by Hon and Grunig [60] as the “confidence and willingness to open oneself to the other party”. It is based on integrity, dependability, and competence. These dimensions require a certain mutuality among the involved actors, where no actor dominates the other. They also require companies to acknowledge and protect their stakeholder’s interests [61]. High levels of moderation may be associated with an imbalance of mutuality and, as a result, impose the dominance of an organization over its stakeholders. Thus, we conclude:

H2. High moderation has a negative effect on trust in the organization.

Additionally, on the stakeholder level, satisfaction and commitment are important targets in managing organization-stakeholder relationships. Satisfaction describes the extent to which stakeholder groups believe that an organization performs its’ activities according to the expectations [62]. Stakeholders’ fulfillment assessments and existing sense of pleasure as a result of an interaction with an organization greatly determine stakeholder satisfaction (Otto, Szymanski, & Varadarajan, 2019). An essential prerequisite for satisfaction is relationship maintenance and whether it is perceived positively by the other party or not [60,63]. Conversational logic involving high levels of moderation potentially restricts parties in their expression of concerns and unease [12]. Thus, we propose:

H3. High moderation has a negative effect on satisfaction with the organization.

Moreover commitment is the extent to which a participant in a discourse thinks that the relationship is worth the cost and effort invested in it [60]. To communicate commitment to their stakeholders, organizations emphasize their desire to build and maintain relationships with their stakeholders in the future, as well as the importance of the quality of the relationships between the parties [64]. Commitment is based on continuance and emotional orientations [60]. High levels of moderation are likely to affect the continuance of dialogues, as they undermine communicative engagement of stakeholders [16]. Further, a conversational logic with high levels of moderation can lead to frustration among stakeholders, as they are likely to feel ignored [33]. Thus, we conclude:

H4. High moderation has a negative effect on perceived commitment.

Finally, control mutuality denotes the degree to which discourse parties perceive participants’ power to influence each other [60,65]. As Hon and Grunig [60] argue, though some imbalance is common and often accepted in organization-public relationships, clearly one-sided efforts by the organization to exercise control are problematic and associated to low satisfaction and often increased levels of activism against the organization. Based on this, we assume control mutuality to be directly impacted by an organizations decision to moderate a conversation online, specifically that:

H5. High moderation has a negative effect on control mutuality.

3. Method

3.1. Two contexts: carbon dioxide emissions and data privacy

Experimental studies were developed to test the effect of different levels of moderation on social media in two topical contexts: environmental concerns (specifically, *carbon dioxide emissions*) and social, governmental concerns, in particular digital information privacy concerns (specifically, *data misuse*). Both concerns are important and recurring issues on social media engagement between large organizations and their stakeholders. As carbon dioxide emissions are a key factor in global warming [66], a growing number of organizations are

reshaping their business models to enable operations with less emissions [105]. However, scandals, e.g., concerning cheating on emission targets are common—as for instance, in the recent case of BMW in 2018 and the prominent case of Volkswagen in 2015 [67]. A recent analysis of online communications following the 2015 Volkswagen scandal suggested that organization-stakeholder interactions were coined by the organization’s strategies of apology and compensation [68] but also attempts at deception and manipulations [67]. Accordingly, in the first study, we focus on the topical context of carbon dioxide emissions, specifically on an organization’s utilization of nonrenewable energy to power company stores.

For the second study, we draw on the issue of data privacy. Privacy concerns relate to an individual’s apprehension and unease over the use of personal data [69,70] and are a rapidly growing issue for organizations and stakeholders alike as they relate to ethical concerns, trust, and regulation [71–74]. In navigating digital environments, people leave ‘digital traces’ when they purchase goods and services, express themselves, communicate with others, or search for information. In light, e.g., of the recent scandal over data misuse by Cambridge Analytica [75], the importance of personal data protection cannot be overestimated. Specifically, our second study employs the context of wearable devices that capture user data. The privacy concern referred to a probable leak of users’ personal information to third parties, such as to advertising and analytics agencies. As one type of information abuse, data leaks occur when information is distributed to third parties without user consent or when information is improperly accessed [76], which occurred, e.g., in the Cambridge Analytica case. As the implications of user data leaks may be severe and result in fraud, identity theft, or physical danger [76], data leaks are an important and recurring issue for online users. Both contexts were chosen to set the experiments against governance issues with personal relevance to respondents.

3.2. Experimental design and stimuli

Two experimental studies were run simultaneously. Participants for both experiments were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Only participants residing in the United States with a minimum approval rate of 90% for previously completed human intelligence tasks were invited to participate in the study. No restriction criteria were applied for screening participants on socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, or income—thus reflecting an approach focused on secondary stakeholders (i.e., the general public) more broadly. In both studies, participants were provided with a consent form that specified that their responses were treated confidentially and would be used exclusively for research purposes. After participants provided their consent for study participation, they were informed that the purpose of the study was to learn about their opinions about the policies of a fictional company (“Nexus”). Each participant was allowed to participate in one experiment only. Participants were paid a fee of USD 1.5 for their participation after they completed the study.

For both experiments we use experimental vignette methodology (EVM) [77] to test for the effect of different levels of moderation in online conversation on several outcomes on the level of social media users. EVM allows the assessment of implicit processes and outcomes by exposing different groups of participants to different stimuli (for instance texts, images or sounds). In this research, we implemented a between-subject design and manipulated the level of moderation by designing two realistic types of conversations—“controlled conversation” (high level of moderation) and “crowdsourced conversation” (low level of moderation).

On social media, organizations can foster discussions by asking questions or providing encouragement for further stakeholder comments on an issue. In contrast, organizations can use a definite statement to address an issue and let stakeholders know that the issue is non-negotiable. Within the context of our two studies, high moderation refers to tactics in which the organization “sets up” a discussion by providing

their definite point of view. Low moderation means that participants are invited to express their opinion freely, even if it is contradictory to the organization’s perspective on the issue.

The structure of the experiments was as follows. Participants in study 1 were informed that the research was about the environmental policies of a certain organization and that they would be reimbursed for participation after they answered all questions. Participants in study 2 were informed that the research would be about data privacy policies. After participants provided their consent to participate in the study, they were presented with a screenshot of a conversation (thread) on the social networking site Facebook.

One half of the participants were randomly assigned to the “controlled conversation” condition and the other half to the “crowdsourced conversation” condition. The screenshots of the threads were similar in content but differed in the level of moderation by the company (see [Appendices 1-2](#) for the stimuli).

In the “controlled conversation” condition, the conversation was started by the organization, as they encouraged stakeholders to submit questions for their Q&A session that was scheduled the following week. In contrast, participants that were presented with the “crowdsourced conversation” viewed a conversation that was initiated by a user, who directed a question towards the organization in a Facebook post. The absolute number of participants in each conversation did not differ (in both conditions, two users and the company participated in the conversation) and the comment of one user was removed by the organization in the “controlled conversation” condition. In the “crowdsourced conversation” condition, all comments from the users remained visible. By removing a comment and explicitly introducing the ‘hand’ of the moderator, we introduced an element of control that was absent from the “crowdsourced conversation”. The valence of the conversation as a whole (positive and negative comments) as well as the specific information on the issue (stands on emission or data privacy respectively) provided by the organization remained constant across the conditions. Finally, the thread was ended by the organization in the “controlled conversation” condition, whereas in the “crowdsourced conversation”, a user had the last word in the conversation. See [Table 2](#) for an overview of the operationalization approach for levels of moderation. After reviewing the screenshot of the Facebook thread, all participants were asked to answer questions about the organization. After participants answered all the questions, they were debriefed and paid.

3.3. Measures

To measure the outcomes of the different levels of moderation, we employed several dependent factors. Attitude scales were adapted from Groza, Pronschinske, and Walker [78] using a 7-point bipolar scale anchored by “like very much/do not like at all”, “favorable/unfavorable”, and “positive/negative”. Commitment, trust, and satisfaction, and control mutuality measures were adapted from Hon and Grunig [60]. The commitment measure focuses on the relationship between an organization and stakeholders whereas the trust measure reflects the

Table 2
Operationalization of levels of moderation.

Dimension	Level of moderation	
	Controlled	Crowdsourced
Initiation	The conversation is initiated by the organization	The conversation is initiated by stakeholders
Empowerment/ tolerance	The organization dominates the dialogue and decisions (deletion of comments)	There is freedom and equality in dialogue as well as in decisions
Termination	There is a definite end of the conversation imposed by the organization (following critique or based on time/resource constraints)	Critical or aggressive comments or the length do not prompt the organization to close a thread

extent to which an organization is perceived as genuinely concerned with the opinions of stakeholders. The satisfaction measure reflects to what extent stakeholders are pleased with an organization. The control mutuality measure, in turn, is concerned with conversation’s participants’ power to influence each other.

See [Appendix 3](#) for the full list of items and confirmatory factor analysis. All measures were reliable based on analysis of Cronbach’s alpha (for details, see [Table 3](#) below).

4. Results

4.1. Study 1

The sample consisted of 97 participants.¹ The sample was slightly dominated by male participants (58.8%), and 41.2% were female. The age of participants varied from 18 to 60 years, and the mean age was 33. Most participants (83%) had some college education or a bachelor’s degree. Most of the participants (88.7%) have reported that they were either self-employed or had a job at the time of the study.

In order to ensure that the level of moderation has been successfully varied in the two conditions, we have conducted a manipulation check. We conducted analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) with the condition specified as the independent variable and the level of moderation specified as the dependent variable. The manipulation check confirmed that participants from the “controlled conversation” condition perceived the conversation as more strongly moderated than did the participants from the “crowdsourced conversation” condition: $F(1, 96) = 60.299, p = .001$ (Mean_{controlled conversation} = 6.29 (SD = 1.07); Mean_{crowdsourced conversation} = 3.96 (SD = 1.79)). Our manipulation of moderation did not cause any effect on participation duration. There were no statistical differences between the participants in the two conditions in terms of time (measured in seconds) used to complete the study: $F(1, 96) = 0.509, p = .45$ (Mean_{controlled conversation} = 550.42 (SD = 775.4); Mean_{crowdsourced conversation} = 458.43 (SD = 457.9)).

An analysis of variance was performed to test for the effect of the different degrees of moderation in the conversations. Consistent with our hypotheses, a high level of moderation had a negative statistically significant effect on attitude, commitment, trust, satisfaction, and control mutuality. The mean values are presented in [Table 4](#).

4.2. Study 2

The sample consisted of 101 participants. The sample was dominated by female participants: 63.4% were female, and 36.6% were male. The age of participants varied from 18 to 65, and the average participant was 35 years old. Most participants (69.4%) had some college education or a bachelor’s degree. Most of the participants (86.1%) have been either employed in paid capacity or self-employed at the time of the study.

Table 3
Cronbach’s alpha for Attitude, Commitment, Trust, Satisfaction, and Control Mutuality.

Construct	Cronbach’s, study 1	Cronbach’s α , study 2
Attitude	0.96	0.96
Commitment	0.92	0.89
Trust	0.95	0.94
Satisfaction	0.93	0.93
Control mutuality	0.96	0.82

¹ Optimal sample size for study 1 and 2 was determined by statistical considerations: We expected a medium effect size (of 0.35–0.4), $p < .05$ for a between-subject experiment with two groups. Accordingly, the corresponding sample size was supposed to fall into the interval 84–109 people.

Table 4
Mean values, study 1.

Construct	$F(1, 96)$	$M_{\text{controlled conversation}}$	$SD_{\text{controlled conversation}}$	$M_{\text{crowdsourced conversation}}$	$SD_{\text{crowdsourced conversation}}$
Attitude	23.05	2.97	1.42	4.29	1.30
Commitment	22.74	3.66	1.31	4.74	1.04
Trust	17.57	3.31	1.28	4.46	1.09
Satisfaction	20.44	3.24	1.31	4.27	1.13
Control mutuality	56.93	2.99	1.15	4.63	0.98

Note: $n = 97, p < .001$

The manipulation check (conducted by running the same analysis of variance as in study 1) confirmed that the manipulation was successful: participants from the “controlled conversation” condition perceived the conversation as more moderated in contrast to participants from the “crowdsourced conversation” condition: $F(1, 100) = 73.702, p = .000$ ($\text{Mean}_{\text{controlled conversation}} = 6.30$ ($SD = 1.23$); $\text{Mean}_{\text{crowdsourced conversation}} = 3.57$ ($SD = 1.89$)). There were no statistical differences between participants in the two conditions in terms of time (measured in seconds) used to complete the study: $F(1, 100) = 1.904, p = .17$ ($\text{Mean}_{\text{controlled conversation}} = 367.38$ ($SD = 174.72$); $\text{Mean}_{\text{crowdsourced conversation}} = 417.25$ ($SD = 188.15$)). Similar to study 1, an analysis of variance revealed a statistically significant negative effect of high levels of moderation on attitude, commitment, trust, satisfaction, and control mutuality (see Table 5 for differences in the mean values).

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

On social media platforms, organizations face challenges in adequately handling stakeholder concerns on social and environmental issues: how much guidance and moderations from the organization is necessary or tolerated in stakeholder conversations? In practice, organizations desire to know whether it is useful to restrict or encourage access to discussions and how different levels of moderation may influence attitudes of their clients and customers on social media.

To address these questions, our studies examined the effects of different conversational logics (based on different levels of moderation) on individuals' attitude, trust, commitment to, and satisfaction with an organization, as well as perceptions of control mutuality in the conversation in two different contexts of stakeholder communications online. Our studies provide evidence that the level of attitude, trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality varies with the conversational logic employed. The results of the two studies suggest that all five outcomes are positively influenced by low levels of moderation. All hypotheses were supported, indicating that high levels of moderation have a negative influence on individuals' attitude, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality.

As such, our studies shift the recent focus from identifying dialogic patterns in CSR communication online [12,16,17] toward studying the effects of the practices employed in conversation and dialogue with stakeholders. Our studies revealed the connection between cognitive outcomes and the conversational logic employed. However, we note that, in this instance, openness should not be confused with

transparency, which is often emphasized in social media communication [79], esp. of government organizations [80]. Basul and Pallazo [28] argue that transparency is based on how corporations communicate. The conversational logic can add transparency to the discourse by defining the topic of conversation and clarifying who enters the arena. Positive outcomes are then not necessarily based only on complete ‘topical openness’ but may also relate to transparency about the rules of engagement. In addition, these rules may then allow for limited moderation in debating an issue. As such, topical openness may be a forced outcome of openness in participation when more ‘bottom up’ debates force organizations to provide additional information or clarify their stance on an issue.

Similar to Illia et al. [12], we introduce the idea of “curated conversations” to underline that both the topic and the participants are important features of the overall moderation: Our results indicate that, if these criteria are fulfilled, stakeholders are more likely to have positive perceptions about an organization. However, curated conversations should not be understood merely as propaganda or as a technique intended to mislead stakeholders. Instead, they should be considered a pathway that sincerely supports the negotiation of an outcome and reduces the complexity for the involved parties. In addition, we hold that users may favor some guidance on participation or the topic in cases of limited understanding of the complexity of an issue, which, in our case, was the potential threats posed by data leaks and environmental concerns. We should not be distracted by the inherent promise of social media that “everybody may talk” when it comes to environmental, social and governance issues and should determine how to enable “everybody can talk” if concerned about an issue.

The complexity of the issue leads to another possible explanation on an individual level. Research on the perpetuation of ignorance shows a discrepancy between the self-relevance of an issue and individuals' willingness to participate and engage in related conversations. People who feel uninformed or unable to grasp the essence of a complex issue, such as environmental, energy or privacy concerns, tend not to invest effort into engaging with a pertinent issue and ‘live with’ stronger feelings of dependence [81] and (necessarily) increased trust in the responsible actors, such as corporations or governments [82]. In such cases, trust may increase via the complexity of an issue, potentially making stakeholders less eager to engage in a lively (open) conversation about an issue and more in agreement with higher levels of control and moderation on the part of the organization.

Table 5
Mean values, study 2.

Construct	$F(1, 100)$	$M_{\text{controlled conversation}}$	$SD_{\text{controlled conversation}}$	$M_{\text{crowdsourced conversation}}$	$SD_{\text{crowdsourced conversation}}$
Attitude	26.34	2.78	1.41	4.07	1.10
Satisfaction	26.53	2.89	1.06	4.02	1.14
Commitment	20.69	3.20	1.15	4.26	1.19
Trust	19.28	3.30	1.29	4.35	1.13
Control mutuality	54.47	2.66	1.23	4.37	1.04

Note: $n = 101, p < .001$

5.2. Practical implications

From the perspective of organizational practice, these findings suggest three main foci for managing conversational logics: first, moderating a discussion may increase the demand to formulate a clear position on the issue; second, managing access to the discussion requires a network of relevant and credible participants that are willing to engage; third, and in light of the above, organizations must consider the actual value and capacity to moderate discussions online.

- *Formulating clear positions.* In order to make conversations meaningful, the organization needs to make their values and beliefs transparent. Often organizations do not publicly promote particularly strong beliefs in order to avoid public discord. However, only a standpoint that is revealed and clearly expressed can be challenged by the public and evolve into a standpoint that is shared by the community. If done properly, moderation can ensure that an organization synchronizes their beliefs with the public in an engaging and transparent process. Similar to this, Palazzo and Scherrer [83] have argued that moral reasoning will allow to create new positions created out of the corporations and societal expectations. Formulating clear propositions can also contribute to making the organization more personable which positively influences stakeholder engagement on social media [84].
- *Managing the discussion network.* As our results show, there is value in including various voices in the conversation. These voices should represent relevant perspectives on the issue at hand and do not necessarily need to be *part* of the organization (such as members or employees), including e.g., both critical consumers as well as ‘faith-holders’ when critically engaging on an issue [85]. Internal networks tend to have high density that allow information to travel fast but such networks rarely create new and/or diverse ideas. External networks usually have lower densities and weaker ties, but these kinds of connections are suitable for bringing in new thoughts and ideas into the network [31,86]. Thus, a discussion network management process demands a detailed understanding of the competencies that are inside and outside the organization. Internal participants of a public conversation, as for example a product engineer, may also need additional help on communicating their ideas adequately. External participants that are included into the conversation need a clear briefing about their role and the nature of conversation.
- *Will and capacity to moderate.* As Kent and Taylor [87] have pointed out, in “case of a large corporation, dialogic activities would require new social media infrastructure and perhaps dozens of people working specifically in social media”. Such a decision cannot be easily made and demands a clear understanding of the actual benefits and strategic value of communicating dialogically via social media. The fact that on many CSR issues the level of dialogical social media engagement is comparatively low [88], signals that for most organizations, the value of such engagement is still at least unclear. In most cases, shallow engagement, ‘lurking’ and monitoring on social media, focused on gaining stakeholder insights, may be seen as more valuable to manage organizational reputation [89]. This is not only because of potentially costly investments in social media dialogues on CSR, but likely also relates to a comparatively low interest among stakeholders in really engaging on CSR issues on social media, likely reflecting stakeholder cynicism of CSR communication more generally [90]—which may add to the reasons to question the utility of social media for more open and dialogical stakeholder engagement [91].

5.3. Limitations and further research

First, we have focused our argument rather on secondary stakeholders. This view of stakeholders sits close to the broader concept of

publics [92], i.e., stakeholders which have a more peripheral exposure to the organization and less continuous involvement with it. We can expect, however, the acceptance for moderation and respective stakeholder outcomes to play out quite differently, when focusing instead on primary stakeholders, such as extant customers, suppliers or even employees in so-called enterprise social media [93].

Second, focusing on dimensions of moderation specifically (i.e., initiation, empowerment, and termination), our experimental approach, in both studies, has necessarily excluded potential further factors in social media communication that might bear on the effects in question. As such, our research question excluded, e.g., aspects related to additional stakeholder voices as well as platform design. Further research could expand on our findings a) by adding questions on the effects of different moderation styles in view of social media dialogues that involve additional actors (e.g., those that are hostile and those that advocate on behalf of the organization (cf. [85]), and b) by including varying design features of different social networking sites related to, e.g., networking intensity, tie strength or privacy concerns, which vary across seminal platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram [94]. Furthermore, future studies could focus not only on the features of network interface design but also on the role of the social networks themselves in moderating CSR conversations by means of framing and filtering certain types of user-generated content. Emerging research on social networks’ and platforms’ communication strategies, suggest that these organizations play an important role in steering how publics perceive unfolding conversations [95]. Taking into account the impacts of additional actors in the conversations, features of network interface design, and eventual moderation strategies of social networks and platforms would allow for a more naturalistic deployment of the vignette methodology.

Third, in our two studies, we did not ask participants about their perception of the organization’s communicative behavior towards the stakeholders participating in the conversation. Perceived levels of moderation and varying degrees of control over a conversation might closely interact with perceptions of ‘rudeness’ on the side of the moderator. We did not control for the organization being perceived as pleasant or unpleasant, welcoming or unfriendly, etc. towards the participants of the conversation. We, therefore, cannot rule out the possibility that part of the variance in the dependent variables might be due to such perceptions rather than solely due to the level of moderation. While we cannot rule this out, our results are indicative that this explanation is unlikely, as the differences in attitude towards the organization between participants in the crowdsourced and the controlled conversations conditions are not extreme—which is indicative of the fact that the vignettes did not induce excessively positive or negative affect on our participants. However, future research could incorporate variables such as *perceived stakeholder friendliness* of the organization [108] both as an endogenous variable to the type of moderation strategy as well as an exogenous variable to other stakeholder outcomes such as trust or satisfaction.

Finally, we believe that turning to the polyphony of communication, particularly in the context of social media, is a promising avenue to extend our line of thought [96]. Literature about polyphony suggests that stakeholder outreach practices should be integrated with other organizational and communications practices of the firm. Together with other corporate practices, stakeholder outreach communication via social media is instrumental in constituting an organization as such [26, 97]. Moderation strategies can be positioned to help with the extension of corporate boundaries through social media communication [26], and, by foregrounding an active and engaged voice, contribute to affirming the organization as an engaged social actor as such [107], and thus potentially bolstering corporate reputation [98].

6. Conclusion

Our research shows that conversational logics regarding

moderation—which have been identified in various research literatures, such as business ethics [12], organizational communication [50], public relations [48], or corporate communication [17]—impact central outcomes of stakeholder communication and engagement, such as attitudes, trust, commitment and satisfaction. Through our studies, we discovered that conversations that involved ‘low moderation tactics’ are perceived as optimal and that stakeholders are willing to accept the provided pathways within the negotiation of an issue based on low moderation. While social media ‘openness’ and the willingness of organizations for ‘bottom up’ engagement with their stakeholders on CSR issues online are fertile topics for future discussion, we see a particular need to better understand especially those (CSR) contexts, in which stakeholders are willing to except more corporate control over online

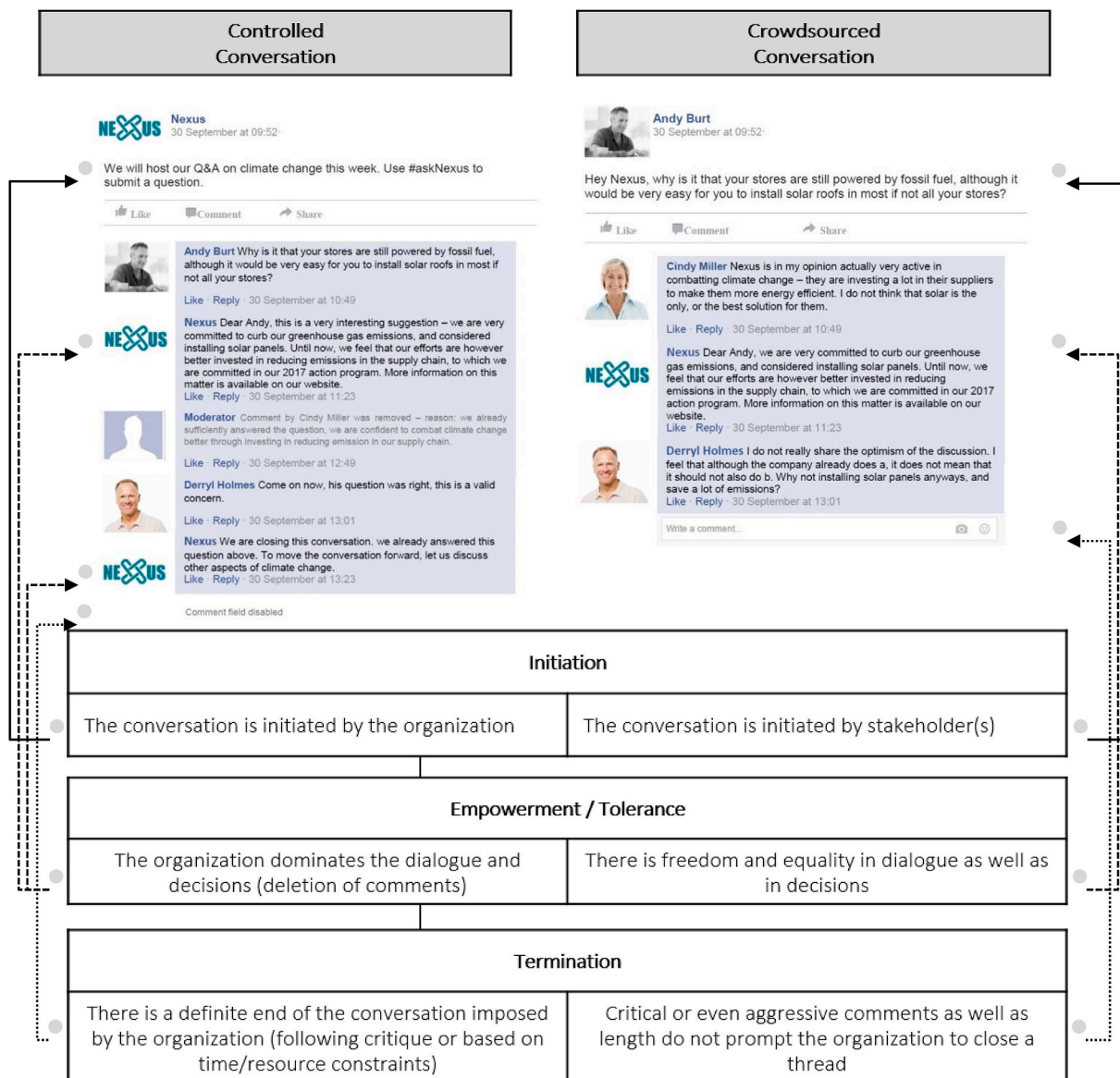
dialogues—e.g. based on the perceived complexity of an issue.

Declaration of competing interest

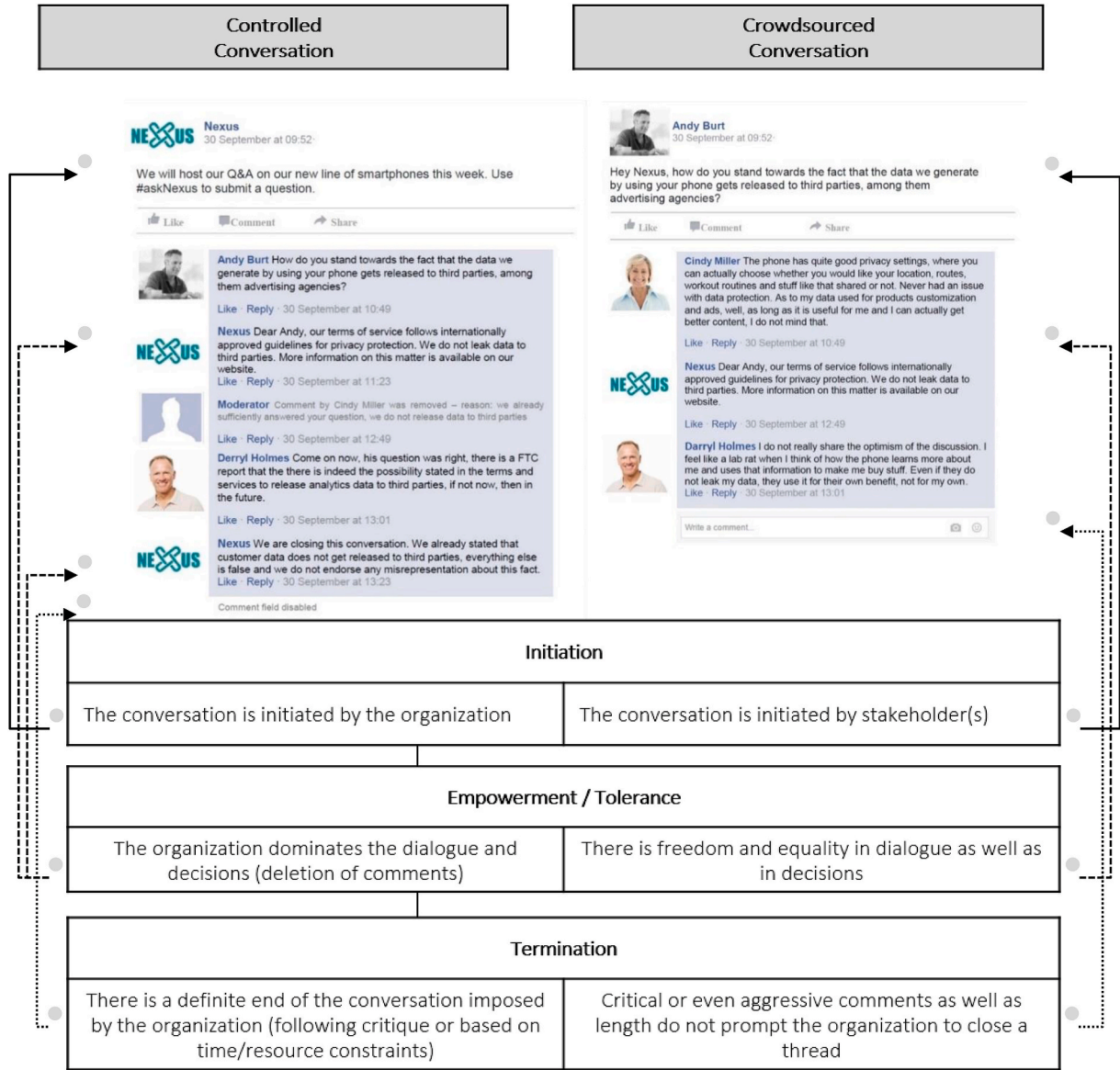
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Appendices.

Appendix 1: Visual representation of the stimuli used in experiment 1



Appendix 2: Visual representation of the stimuli used in experiment 2



Appendix 3: Scales for measuring dependent variables and corresponding confirmatory factor analysis for experiment 1 (E1) and experiment 2 (E2)

#	Attitude (based on [78])	E1	E2
1	What is your general opinion about Nexus (the company)? (Do not like at all – Like very much)	0.97	0.96
2	What is your general opinion about Nexus (the company)? (Very unfavorable – Very favorable)	0.96	0.97
3	What is your general opinion about Nexus (the company)? (Very negative – Very positive)	0.98	0.97
Cumulative percent of variance explained		93.16	92.95
#	Commitment (based on [60])	E1	E2
1	I feel that the company is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to its stakeholders.	0.92	0.87
2	Compared to other companies, stakeholders value their relationship with Nexus (the company).	0.84	0.87
3	There is a long-lasting bond between the company and its stakeholders.	0.90	0.87
4	I can see that the company wants to maintain a relationship with its stakeholders.	0.92	0.90
Cumulative percent of variance explained		80.25	76.38
#	Satisfaction (based on [60])	E1	E2

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(continued)

#	Attitude (based on [78])	E1	E2
1	Overall, stakeholders are happy with Nexus (the company).	0.95	0.94
2	I believe that most people are happy in their interactions with the company.	0.92	0.95
3	Generally speaking, stakeholders are pleased with the relationship the company has established with them.	0.95	0.94
Cumulative percent of variance explained		88.26	88.40
#	Trust (based on [60])	E1	E2
1	The company treats people fairly and justly.	0.92	0.93
2	The company can be relied on to keep its promises.	0.91	0.92
3	Whenever the company makes an important decision, it will be concerned about its stakeholders.	0.91	0.83
4	I believe the company takes the opinions of its stakeholders into account when making decisions.	0.91	0.90
5	I feel that stakeholders can trust the company to do what it says it will do.	0.89	0.91
Cumulative percent of variance explained		82.32	80.43
#	Control mutuality (based on [60])	E1	E2
1	The company believes the opinions of its stakeholders are legitimate.	0.95	0.92
2	It seems like the company really listens to what people have to say.	0.96	0.92
3	In dealing with people, the company seems to throw its weight around. (Reverse coded)	0.97	0.74
Cumulative percent of variance explained		92.39	74.58

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