

# Public Engagement in Supportive Communication Behaviors toward an Organization: Effects of Relational Satisfaction and Organizational Reputation in Public Relations Management

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Over the years, the understanding of the link between organization–public relationships and reputation constructs and their attitudinal and behavioral outcomes has advanced considerably. The Excellence Study (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) suggested that positive relationships built and maintained between organizations and publics can encourage publics to engage in supportive behaviors toward organizations. In support of this argument, Ki and Hon (2007b) empirically demonstrated the link between organization–public relationships and a public’s supportive attitude and behavioral intentions toward an organization. Their findings show that among the four relationship indicators—control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment—relational satisfaction a public has with the

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organization had the strongest direct impact on the public's supportive attitude and indirect effects on behavioral intentions toward the organization.

From the reputation management perspective, Fombrun pointed out that reputation "produces support for the company" (Fombrun & van Riel, 2003, p. 5), and added that reputation should be fostered because it affects publics' behaviors beneficial to organizations (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & van Riel, 2003). Empirical findings from recent studies support this view. Sung and Yang (2008) found that the reputation of a university perceived by its students had significant influence on their supportive attitudes toward the university. Also, in the context of country reputation, Yang, Shin, Lee and Wrigley (2008) found that the reputation of Korea perceived by foreigners had a strong effect on their supportive intentions toward Korea.

As an extension to this line of research, the current study proposes to examine the effects of both relational satisfaction—a critical dimension of organization–public relationships—and organizational reputation on customers' supportive behaviors toward an organization, especially communication behaviors such as engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication and use of organizational media. Furthermore, this study aims to examine the critical mediation role of customers' identification with a company in the effects of relational satisfaction and organizational reputation on supportive communication behaviors.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Supportive Communication Behaviors of Customers

*Engagement in word-of-mouth communication.* Word-of-mouth communication is defined as, "informal, person-to-person communication between a perceived noncommercial communicator and a receiver regarding a brand, a product, an organization, or a service" (Harrison-Walker, 2001, p. 70). Scholars agree that customers' positive word-of-mouth communication is considered as a strong supportive behavior toward organizations because of its influence on organizations' growth and revenue (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Gremler, Gwinner, & Brown, 2001). Gremler et al. argued that positive word-of-mouth communication can be seen as the surest way to create business for companies. Along the same line, Aaker commented that the value of loyal customers to an organization stems from their influence on others in the marketplace. Godes and Mayzlin (2004) concluded that "there is little debate as to whether word-of-mouth matters to the firm" (p. 545).

*Use of organizational media.* In this study, organizational media refer to media that are “physically produced and delivered to the recipient by the sponsor and can include any object that carries a client’s name or message” (Hallahan, 2001, p. 467). Messages conveyed through organizational media (e.g., organizations’ Web sites, e-mails from the organizations, organization-sponsored magazines) tend to be promotional and detailed because organizational media, as compared to public media, can “offer greater message capacity and can deliver more complex messages” (Hallahan, 2001, p. 467).

Most of the time, public relations communication programs and activities occur via mediated materials (Huang, 2001). As a result, at a program-level, public relations effectiveness is often measured by changes in publics’ beliefs, attitudes, and behavior that have occurred as a result of public relations communication programs (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002). However, for any communication effect to occur, strategic publics such as customers must first choose to turn to and pay attention to the organizational messages. Nevertheless, encouraging publics to pay attention to organizational messages is not an easy task (J. Grunig, 1990), because publics do not expose themselves to such messages “as part of a daily media routine” (Hallahan, 2001, p. 467).

### Effects of Relational Satisfaction on Positive Word-of-mouth Communication

Using Hon and J. Grunig’s (1999) relationship indexes, Ki and Hon (2007b) empirically tested the linkages among the indicators of quality relationship outcomes—control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment—and supportive attitude and behavioral intentions of a public toward an organization. They found that the public’s perception of relational satisfaction with the organization had the strongest direct effects on supportive attitude and indirect effects on behavioral intentions toward that organization, including the intention to recommend the organization to others. Relational satisfaction refers to “the extent to which one party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationships are reinforced” (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999, p. 20).

Following this review of the literature, this study suggests the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Customers’ perception of relational satisfaction is positively associated with their engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication.

## Effects of Organizational Reputation on Positive Word-of-mouth Communication

Reputation refers to “a collective assessment of a company’s ability to provide valued outcomes to a representative group or stakeholders” (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000, p. 243). Reputation scholars maintain that an organization’s salient characteristics, as compared to the characteristics of other organizations in the same field, form a basis for the reputation of the organization (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Put differently, what’s unique and distinct about the organization is central to the perceptions publics hold of its organizational reputation. Furthermore, things that people talk about are “unique in some respect” (Dye, 2000, p. 140). Therefore, it can be argued that the uniqueness or distinctiveness of the organization would lead publics to talk about the organization to others. The review of literature leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* Customers’ favorable perception of organizational reputation is positively associated with their engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication.

## Effects of Relational Satisfaction and Organizational Reputation on Use of Organizational Media

Researchers agree that publics pay attention to the messages reinforcing their preexisting beliefs and attitudes (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947; Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Paek, 2008). According to Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, people pay attention to media “in accord with their own taste and bias” (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944, p. 80). Hyman and Sheatsley (1947) also reported that people are likely “to expose themselves to information which is congenial with their prior attitudes” (p. 417). Similarly, Klapper (1960) claimed that individuals have a tendency to prefer media that reinforce and are “in accord with their existing attitudes and interests” (p. 19).

Thus, it can be argued that customers may pay attention to organizational messages if they correspond with their preexisting attitudes or beliefs. Attending to such messages that are attitude and belief-consistent may work as a self-initiated approach to strengthen their existing perceptions<sup>1</sup> of

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<sup>1</sup>J. Grunig and Hung (2002) argued that when the term *perception* is used in a public relations context, for instance, publics’ perception of reputation or organization–public relationships, it refers to “higher-level cognitive process (i.e., what people think about and remember about an organization)” (p. 3), rather than referring to “lower-level perceptual process of recognizing an organization” (p. 3).

relational satisfaction and organizational reputation. Specifically, in terms of relational satisfaction and organizational reputation, customers, particularly the customers holding a high level of relational satisfaction and favorable perceptions of organizational reputation, are more likely to use organizational media when the messages positively portrays the topics relevant to customer satisfaction and organizational reputation. Based on the discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

*Hypothesis 3:* Customers' perception of relational satisfaction is positively associated with their use of organizational media.

*Hypothesis 4:* Customers' favorable perception of organizational reputation is positively associated with their use of organizational media.

### Customers' Identification with Company

Identification with company draws on the theories of social identity and organizational identification. According to social identity theory, an individual's self-concept has two components: personal identity (e.g., psychological traits, abilities, interests) and social identities derived from social groups or categories to which the individual belongs (Hogg, 1996; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Ashforth and Mael (1989) were the first to propose that an organization can be seen as a social category, playing a key role in an individual's social identity. Organizational identification is defined as an individual's perception of oneness-with or belonging to an organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Recently, marketing scholars have extended the concept of organizational identification beyond formal membership to include nonmembers (e.g., customers), proposing that even customers can perceive a company as a source of their positive social identity (e.g., Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003, 2004).

*Effects of relational satisfaction on identification with company.* Mael and Ashforth's (1992) study on alumni identification with their college has found that alumni satisfaction with the institution was positively associated with their organizational identification. Grounding their reasoning on organizational behavior studies, Mael and Ashforth explained that because satisfaction depends on an organization "contributing suitably to the attainment of one's personal objectives" (Bullock, 1952, p. 7, as cited in Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 108), individuals identify with an institution if that institution helps them attain their goals and if they are satisfied with

its offerings. Bhattacharya, Rao, and Glynn (1995) also found similar findings. On the basis of the reviewed literature, the researcher proposed the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5:* Customers' perception of relational satisfaction is positively associated with their identification with the organization.

*Effects of organizational reputation on identification with company.* Social identification and organizational identification theorists argue that individuals want to emphasize their own distinctiveness to fulfill a need to distinguish themselves from others in a social environment (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, individuals are more likely to identify with groups and organizations that have distinctive attributes that they attach importance to (Ahearne et al., 2005; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Numerous studies have demonstrated the link between member, former member, and even non-member identification with an organization and the favorable reputation of that organization (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Elsbach, 2002; Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Smidts, Pruyn, & van Riel, 2001). The review of literature leads to the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 6:* Customers' favorable perception of organizational reputation is positively associated with their identification with the organization.

*Effects of customers' identification with company on positive word-of-mouth communication.* Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) argued that when customers identify with companies, they become "champions of the companies" and promote the company and its products to others (p. 76). Fombrun and van Riel (2003) suggested that the more customers identify with a company, the more likely they will be to act as ambassadors for the company. This is because customers who identify with a company focus on tasks that are beneficial to the whole organization (e.g., engaging in positive word-of-mouth communication) and engaging in such tasks allow customers to express their identification (Ahearne et al., 2005). Therefore, this study suggests the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 7:* Customers' identification with an organization is positively associated with their engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication.

*Effects of customers' identification with company on use of organizational media.* According to social identity theory, individuals obtain positive social identity from favorably comparing the characteristics of the groups they belong to with those of relevant other groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Therefore, individuals actively seek ways to favorably compare the defining characteristics of groups to which they belong to those of other relevant groups. One of the possible ways for individuals to make the characteristics of their social groups positive is to actively watch or read about the positive portrayals of their social groups in the media (Harwood, 1999).

Extending the uses and gratification framework to the social identity level, in particular Blumler's (1985) earlier proposition that individuals "maintain and strengthen their social identities through what they see, read and hear in the media" (p. 50), Harwood (1999) conducted a study to investigate the link between social identification and media use. His finding suggests that individuals turn to media that "strengthen their identification with a particular social group and/or make that identification more positive" (Harwood, 1999, p. 123). Given this fact, this study hypothesizes:

*Hypothesis 8:* Customers' identification with an organization is positively associated with their use of organizational media.

*Effects of communication behaviors on ongoing interaction.* One of the most widely recognized definitions of public relations is "the management of communication between an organization and its publics" (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6). Managing communication through various communication activities such as sending messages and using organizational media constitutes a central part of public relations. However, "managed communication by an organization is not an end itself, but rather a means to an end" (Dozier & Ehling, 1992, p. 160). In other words, public relations practitioners engage in various communication programs and activities in order to achieve effects such as behavioral change (e.g., repeat patronage) among target publics. Evaluation of such outcomes of public relations communication efforts has traditionally been used to demonstrate public relations effectiveness (Hon, 1998).

In addition, Plowman (1998) has suggested that "communication is the link of interaction between the organization and its publics" (p. 238). Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) supported this view as well, maintaining that communication works as a linkage to interactions between organization and its publics.

Public relations scholars have emphasized the importance of the combined, complementary effects of interpersonal communication (i.e., word-of-mouth communication) and mass communication (i.e., use of organizational media) on publics' beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors (Grunig & Ipes, 1983; Ledingham, 1993; O'Keefe & Reid, 1990). They noted that the best results of communication efforts, such as behavioral change, can be achieved when both mass and interpersonal communication is involved. Furthermore, marketing studies demonstrate a positive relationship between interpersonal communication such as word-of-mouth and brand loyalty (Gounaris & Stathakopoulos, 2004).

There are two perspectives in marketing research in defining and measuring brand loyalty: behavioral and attitudinal. Behavioral brand loyalty refers to repeated purchases of particular products or services, and "attitudinal brand loyalty includes a degree of dispositional commitment in terms of some unique value associated with the brand" (Chaudhury & Holbrook, 2001, p. 82). Whereas traditional literature on brand loyalty predominantly reflects behavioral brand loyalty, contemporary literature recognizes customer loyalty as bi-dimensional concept comprising both a behavioral dimension (i.e., repeat purchase, repeat patronage for retail services) and an attitudinal dimension (i.e., commitment; Chaudhury & Holbrook, 2001; Dick & Basu, 1994; Odin, Odin, & Valette-Florence, 2001; Prichard, Howard, & Havitz, 1992; Yi & Jeon, 2003; Yim & Kannan, 1999). More recently, scholars have examined Oliver's (1997) four-dimension scale of loyalty comprising cognitive, affective, conative, and action loyalty and successfully shown that the scale is reliable and valid (Harris & Goode, 2004).

However, scholars maintained that the specific purpose of study should determine which conceptualization and operationalization of brand loyalty a study should follow (Leenheer, van Heerde, Bijmolt, & Smidts, 2007). Since we are interested in the effects of communication on customers' interaction with the organization that is measured by their repeat patronage to the organization, ongoing interaction in this study captures behavioral brand loyalty.

Following the aforementioned review of the literature, this study posits the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 9:* Customers' engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication about an organization is positively associated with their ongoing interaction with the organization.

*Hypothesis 10:* Customers' use of organizational media is positively associated with their ongoing interaction with the organization.

## METHOD

### The Organization Studied

To test the proposed model, a paper survey was conducted with the customers of Wegmans Food Markets, Inc. in Syracuse, NY. We selected Wegmans Food Markets, Inc. for its strong visibility and favorable reputation in the community, as well as for its distinctive characteristics, which are necessary for identification with company to occur (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003).

### Survey Sample

Data were collected from the customers of Wegmans Food Markets, Inc. in the greater Syracuse, NY area. Customers were purposely chosen because they were most relevant to the focus of this research. A paper survey of available customers was conducted from February 11 to March 10, 2008. The response rate was 68%. A group of research assistants initially contacted 515 potential participants in person. Three hundred and fifty questionnaires were ultimately collected, all of which were usable for this study. About 59% of the participants were women and 41% men. Participants in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s accounted for 22%, 21%, 25%, 23%, and 7%, respectively. Participants who were younger than 20 and who were 70 or older each accounted for less than one percent.

### Measurement Instrumentation

The measurement items were mostly adopted from previous research (Fombrun et al., 2000; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Ki & Hon, 2007a; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). To measure relational satisfaction, this study used the relationship measurement scales used by Ki and Hon (2007a). Although this scale has four indexes (i.e., trust, commitment, satisfaction, and control mutuality), this study used only the items related to "relational satisfaction" because they are most relevant to the focus of this research. This variable was measured using eight items ( $\alpha = .94$ ). To measure organizational reputation, the Harris-Fombrun Reputation Quotient (Fombrun et al., 2000) was modified to 12 items with three dimensions<sup>2</sup> ( $\alpha = .93$ ).

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<sup>2</sup>In this study, considering the research context of a family-owned, retail industry, the researcher removed dimensions that apply to public companies (i.e., financial performance). Also, the quality of products and services dimension was modified to reflect only the product-related questions, and a new dimension of quality of services was added. The items measuring the new dimension were adopted from the literature on reputation of companies in the retail and service industry (Berens & van Riel, 2004; Walsh, Dinnie, & Wiedmann, 2006). Thus, the dimensions used are quality of products, quality of services, and workplace environment.

TABLE 1  
Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Variables

| <i>Variable</i>                                       | <i>Label</i> | <i>Number of measurement items</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>α</i> |
|---|--------------|------------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| 1. Relational satisfaction                            | RST          | 8 items                            | 5.58     | .24       | .94      |
| 2. Organizational reputation                          | REP          | 12 items                           | 6.07     | .28       | .93      |
| 3. Customers' identification with company             | CCI          | 6 items                            | 2.80     | .36       | .93      |
| 4. Engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication | WOM          | 11 items                           | 4.40     | 1.02      | .95      |
| 5. Use of organizational media                        | UOM          | 4 items                            | 3.08     | .61       | .85      |
| 6. Ongoing Interaction                                | LYT          | 1 item                             | 4.35     | 2.09      |          |

*Note.* For all measurement items, 7-point scale was used (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neutral*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) except for the last item measuring ongoing interaction. Response categories ranged from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*more than six times*).

In this study, Mael and Ashforth's (1992) organizational identification scale was used to measure customers' *identification with company*, adapting the wording to fit the context of this study. This variable was measured using six items ( $\alpha = .93$ ). To measure customers' *engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication*, a measurement scale developed by Harrison-Walker (2001) was used, adapting the wording to fit the context of the current study. This variable was measured with an 11-item with two dimensions<sup>3</sup> ( $\alpha = .95$ ). The items to measure customers' *use of organizational media*, the researcher constructed four similarly worded items. This variable was measured with four items ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Customers' *ongoing interaction* with the organization variable was measured by the frequency with which customers shop at the organization's store per month. The researcher asked customers the following question: "How many times a month do you shop at Wegmans?" Response categories ranged from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*more than six times*;  $M = 4.35$ ,  $SD = 2.09$ ).

For all items except for the item to measure ongoing interaction, a 7-point Likert scale of disagreement–agreement was used with 4 as a neutral point. Please see Table 1 for descriptive statistics and measurement reliability and the Appendix for description of the items.

<sup>3</sup>The first dimension, called *word-of-mouth activity*, reflects frequency (how often the individuals engages in word-of-mouth and with how many people) and detail (how much is said). The second dimension, called *word-of-mouth praise*, reflects the favorableness of the communication.

## RESULTS

Structural equation modeling was used to test the models presented in Figures 1 and 2. In the tested models, relational satisfaction, organizational reputation, customers' identification with the company, engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication, and use of organizational media were specified as latent variables with multiple indicators. Ongoing interaction was specified as single-item observed variable. The statistical package the researcher used for model estimation was AMOS 16.0. The estimation method was *full information maximum likelihood*. To assess data-model fit, we used Hu and Bentler's (1999) joint-cutoff criteria for fit indexes in structural equation model.<sup>4</sup>

Estimation for the initial measurement model indicated unsatisfactory fit to the data,  $\chi^2(238, N=350)=817.78, p<.001, \chi^2/df=3.44$ , Comparative Fit Index (CFI)=.91, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)=.06, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)=.08 (90% CI=.077, .090). The researcher proceeded to modify the model. For the modification, the researcher added error covariances among the observed items within the same subscale, following Byrne (2001)'s recommendation.<sup>5</sup> The modified measurement model was reestimated and the results indicated a satisfactory fit,  $\chi^2(232, N=350)=556.57, p<.001, \chi^2/df=2.40, CFI=.95, SRMR=.06, RMSEA=.06$  (90% CI=.057, .070). The modified measurement model is presented in Figure 3.

The standardized factor loadings in the model indicated that all of the five constructs had a good validity (see Figure 3). The minimum factor loading was .67 in the indicator of "I am very interested in what others think about Wegmans" (CCI2) in the latent variable of customers' identification with company.

Before undertaking the main analysis, the researcher tested whether the data met the assumption of multivariate normality, an important assumption in SEM (Byrne, 2001). Our data, indeed, showed significant positive multivariate kurtosis, indicating that the assumption of multivariate normality was not met. A common procedure to address multivariate nonnormality is bootstrapping (Byrne, 2001). Therefore, a bootstrap was performed

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<sup>4</sup>According to them, a SEM model with Comparative Fit Index  $\geq .96$  and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)  $\leq 1.0$  or Root Mean Square Error of Approximation  $\leq .06$  and SRMR  $\leq 1.0$  suggests that the fit between the data and the proposed model is tenable.

<sup>5</sup>Byrne (2001) proposed that error covariances are sometimes necessary to explain for unique commonalities between items or redundant content of two items. The researcher found six error covariances (i.e., e04-e05, e04-e11, e10-e11, e12-e13, e14-e15, e20-e23). The coefficients of these covariances ranged from  $r = .29$  to  $.45$ .

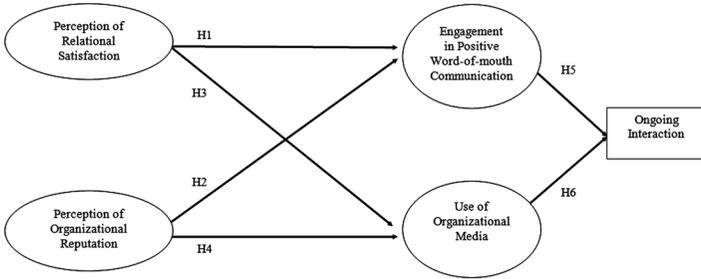


FIGURE 1 Proposed baseline model. For the sake of brevity, covariances among exogenous variables and error terms for indicators of latent variables are omitted from the figure. Ovals represent latent variables.

in Amos (1000 samples,  $N = 350$ ) using the maximum likelihood (ML) estimates to provide bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for each of the bootstrap estimates. The bootstrap results did not deviate from those based on normal theory. None of the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals for significant paths in Figure 5 (results for the mediating test of identification with company) included zero. In other words, the significant paths in Figure 5 remained significant in the bootstrapping procedure. Also, despite the fact that multivariate normality is an important assumption for maximum likelihood estimation (Byrne, 2001), research has shown that maximum likelihood estimation estimators are least biased and robust to minor normality violations (Chou & Bentler, 1995; Kline, 1998; West, Finch, & Curan, 1995).

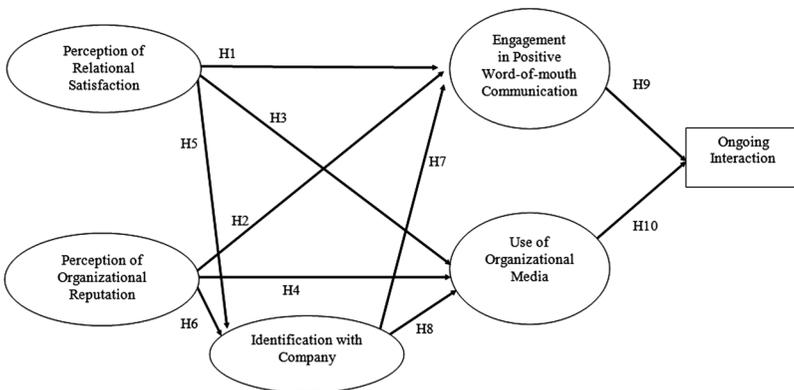


FIGURE 2 Proposed mediation model (with customers' identification with company as a mediator). For the sake of brevity, covariances among exogenous variables and error terms for indicators of latent variables are omitted from the figure. Ovals represent latent variables.

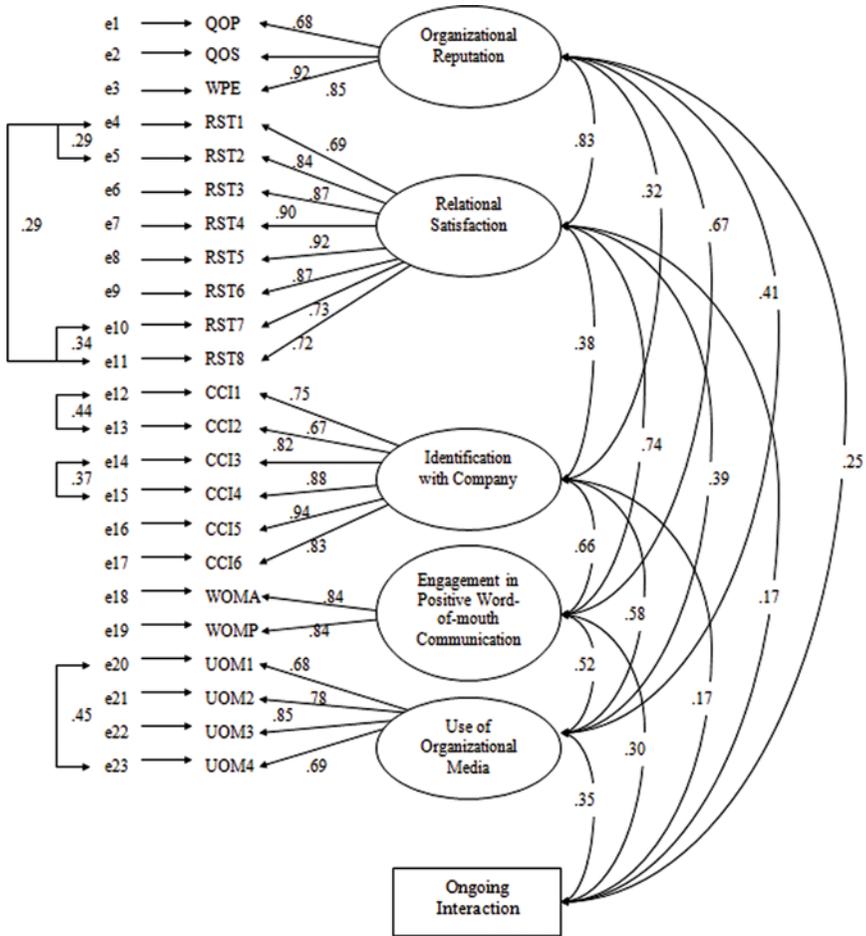


FIGURE 3 Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of measurement items.

To test for discriminant validity of the five latent variables in the mediation model, we ran a series of nested comparisons.  $\chi^2$  difference tests were conducted to test whether each of the factor correlations was significantly different from unity. The unconstrained model was constructed with freely correlated factors, whereas a particular factor correlation was fixed to unity in the constrained model. The difference in  $\chi^2$  values between the unconstrained model and the constrained model permits the test of discriminant validity. For example, the  $\chi^2$  difference score regarding the correlation between relational satisfaction and organizational reputation was 29.61

( $p < .001$ ). All of the  $\chi^2$  differences were significant, suggesting that all the latent constructs were mutually distinctive constructs; discriminant validity was thus achieved (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips., 1991; Gerbing & Anderson, 1988).

To identify the best-fitting model, a hierarchical/nested structural equation model comparison was conducted with a  $\chi^2$  difference test between the baseline model and the mediation model. A  $\chi^2$  difference test is appropriate because the baseline model is nested in the mediation model. In the baseline model (see Figure 4), the following direct paths were constrained to 0: the direct paths from relational satisfaction and organizational reputation to identification with company and the direct paths from identification with company to engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication and use of organizational media. In the mediation model (see Figure 5), these paths were not constrained to 0.

According to the results in Figure 4 (for the baseline model) and Figure 5 (for the mediation model), the mediation model fit the data well and better than the baseline model. In addition, the model containing the constrained paths (the baseline model) did not lead to a significant  $\chi^2$  change. Had the  $\chi^2$  difference test indicated a nonsignificant difference between the baseline and mediation models, a more parsimonious model, which is the baseline model, should have been chosen. However, the results of the  $\chi^2$  difference test between the baseline and mediation models indicated a significant difference between the models. Thus, the mediation model was selected as the better

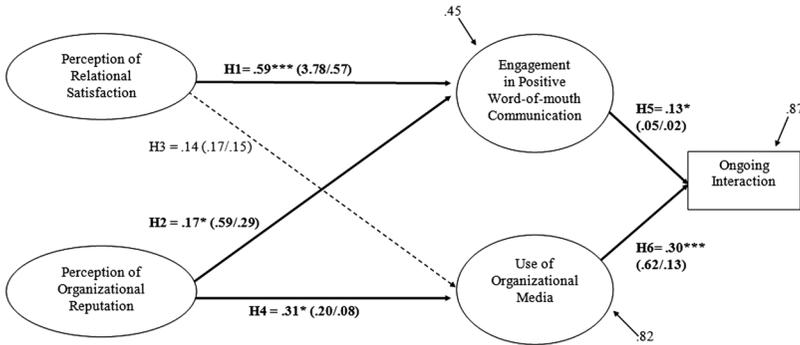


FIGURE 4 Results for the baseline model. Note.  $\chi^2(240, N = 350) = 752.53, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 3.14, CFI = .92, SRMR = .20, RMSEA = .08$  (90% CI = .072, .085). Coefficients are standardized regression weight. The numerical values within parenthesis are unstandardized regression weights and their standard errors. For the sake of brevity, covariances among exogenous variables and error terms for indicators of latent variables are omitted from the figure. Ovals represent latent variables. \* $p < .05, ***p < .001$ .

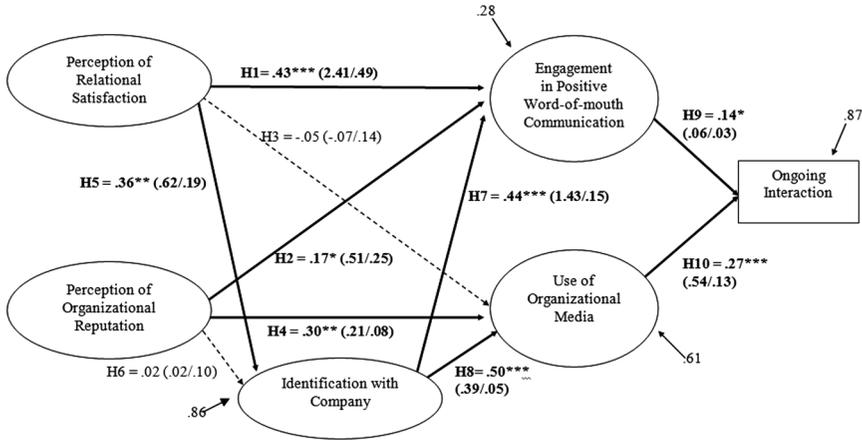


FIGURE 5 Results for the mediation model (with customers’ identification with company as a mediator).  $\chi^2(236, N = 350) = 568.44, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 2.41, CFI = .95, SRMR = .06, RMSEA = .06$  (90% CI = .057, .070). Coefficients are standardized regression weight. The numerical values within parenthesis are unstandardized regression weights and their standard errors. For the sake of brevity, covariances among exogenous variables and error terms for indicators of latent variables are omitted from the figure. Ovals represent latent variables. \* $p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001$ .

model throughout all of the statistical measures:  $\Delta df = 4$  (240–236),  $\Delta\chi^2 = 184.09$  (752.53–568.44),  $p < .001, CFI$  (from .92 to .95),  $SRMR$  (from .20 to .06),  $RMSEA$  (from .08 to .06).

### Hypotheses Testing

Because the mediation model (see Figure 5) was selected as the better model, the results of the mediation model will be briefly reported here. Please see the results of the baseline model in Figure 4.

**H1: Effects of relational satisfaction on engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication.** As the path H1 in Figure 5 indicates, this hypothesis was supported,  $\beta = .43$  ( $B = 2.41, SE = .49$ ),  $p < .001$ . This suggests that the more customers perceive the relationship they have with an organization to be satisfactory, the more they engage in positive word-of-mouth communication about the organization.

**H2: Effects of organizational reputation on engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication.** As path H2 in Figure 5 indicates, this hypothesis was supported,  $\beta = .17$  ( $B = .51, SE = .25$ ),  $p < .05$ . This suggests

that the more favorable customers' perception of an organization's reputation is, the more they engage in positive word-of-mouth communication about the organization.

*H3: Effects of relational satisfaction on use of organizational media.*

As the path H3 in Figure 5 indicates, there was no significant association between relational satisfaction and customers' use of organizational media,  $\beta = -.05$  ( $B = -.07$ ,  $SE = .14$ ), *ns*.

*H4: Effects of organizational reputation on use of organizational media.*

As path H4 in Figure 5 indicates, this hypothesis was supported,  $\beta = .30$  ( $B = .21$ ,  $SE = .08$ ),  $p < .01$ . This suggests that the more favorable customers' perception of an organization's reputation is, the more they use organizational media.

*H5: Effects of relational satisfaction on identification with company.*

As path H5 in Figure 5 indicates, this hypothesis was supported,  $\beta = .36$  ( $B = .62$ ,  $SE = .19$ ),  $p < .01$ . This suggests that the more customers perceive the relationship they have with an organization to be satisfactory, the more customers identify with the organization.

*H6: Effects of organizational reputation on identification with company.*

As path H6 in Figure 5 indicates, there was no significant association between favorable organizational reputation and customers' identification with the organization,  $\beta = .02$  ( $B = .02$ ,  $SE = .10$ ), *ns*.

*H7: Effects of identification with company on engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication.* As path H7 in Figure 5 indicates, this hypothesis was supported,  $\beta = .44$  ( $B = 1.43$ ,  $SE = .15$ ),  $p < .001$ . This indicates that the more customers identify with an organization, the more they engage in positive word-of-mouth communication about the organization.

*H8: Effects of identification with company on use of organizational media.* As path H8 in Figure 5 indicates, this hypothesis was supported,  $\beta = .50$  ( $B = .39$ ,  $SE = .05$ ),  $p < .001$ . This suggests that the more customers identify with an organization, the more they use organizational media.

*H9: Effects of engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication on ongoing interaction.* As path H9 in Figure 5 indicates, this hypothesis was supported,  $\beta = .27$  ( $B = .54$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that customers who talk positively and frequently about the organization to others

are more likely to interact with the organization, in other word, to patronize the organization frequently.

*H10: Effects of use of organizational media on ongoing interaction.* As path H10 in Figure 5 indicates, this hypothesis was supported,  $\beta = .27$  ( $B = .54$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This suggests that customers who pay more attention to the information on the organization's Web site, e-mails, flyers/advertisements, and organization-published magazines are more likely to interact with the organization, in other words, to patronize the organization frequently.

Our model contained indirect effects of relational satisfaction, organizational reputation, and identification with company on engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication, use of organizational media, and ongoing interaction. The Sobel test for the significance of indirect effects and the MacKinnon, Lockwood, and Hoffman (1998) tests were used to examine the possibility that these indirect effects (the products of the two coefficients for the mediational paths in each case) were statistically null. Results of these tests, presented in Table 2, demonstrate that the indirect effects of relational satisfaction on both positive word-of-mouth communication and use of organizational media through identification with company are statistically significant. However, tests of the indirect effects of relational satisfaction and identification with company on ongoing interaction through engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication found that these effects are significant only when using the more statistically powerful MacKinnon et al.'s (1988) distribution of products test (recommended by Holbert & Stephenson, 2003). Also, results show that the indirect effects of organizational reputation and identification with company on ongoing interaction through use of organizational media are statistically significant. However, the results of these tests indicate that organizational reputation's indirect effect on ongoing interaction through positive word-of-mouth communication is not statistically significant, suggesting the use of organizational media's more significant mediating role between organizational reputation and ongoing interaction.

In addition, the researcher conducted a formal significance test of the (total) indirect effects using a bootstrap procedure developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004).<sup>6</sup> The test demonstrated that the indirect effects in the paths from relational satisfaction to positive word-of-mouth communication ( $\beta = .16$ ) through identification with company were significant at

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<sup>6</sup>The bootstrap procedure (1000 samples,  $N = 350$ ) was used to generate a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect.

TABLE 2  
Tests for the Statistical Significance of Indirect Effects

|  | <i>Indirect effect</i> | <i>Sobel test</i> | <i>MacKinnon, Lockwood, and Hoffman (1998) test</i> |
|--|------------------------|-------------------|---|
| Relational satisfaction → identification with company → positive WOM | .89                    | 3.09**            | 31.07***  |
| Relational satisfaction → identification with company → media use    | .24                    | 3.01**            | 25.43***  |
| Relational satisfaction → positive WOM → ongoing interaction         | .14                    | 1.85              | 2.46*   |
| Organizational reputation → positive WOM → ongoing interaction       | .03                    | 1.43              | 1.02  |
| Organizational reputation → media use → ongoing interaction          | .11                    | 2.22*             | 10.9***   |
| Identification with company → positive WOM → ongoing interaction     | .09                    | 1.96              | 4.77**  |
| Identification with company → media use → ongoing interaction        | .21                    | 3.67***           | 11.95***  |

*Notes.* WOM = word of mouth. All coefficients are unstandardized. The Sobel test was calculated using Preacher and Leonardelli (2003). The MacKinnon et al. test was calculated using the instructions from Holbert and Stephenson (2003).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

$p = .002$  (95% CI: .056, .284),<sup>7</sup> and from relational satisfaction to use of organizational media ( $\beta = .18$ ) through identification with company were significant as well at  $p = .003$  (95% CI: .067, .331). However, the indirect effects in the paths from organizational reputation to both positive word-of-mouth communication ( $\beta = .01$ , *ns*) and use of organizational media ( $\beta = .01$ , *ns*) through identification with company were not significant. The total indirect effects in the paths from relational satisfaction to ongoing interaction ( $\beta = .12$ ) through identification with company, engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication, and use of organizational media were significant at  $p = .038$  (95% CI: .010, .213). The total indirect effects in the paths from organizational reputation to ongoing interaction ( $\beta = .11$ ) through identification with company, engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication, and use of organizational media were significant at  $p = .005$  (95% CI: .028, .195). The total indirect effects in the

<sup>7</sup>As the 95% bias corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect was estimated to lie between .056 and .284—because zero was not in this confidence interval—it is safe to conclude that the indirect effect was significantly different from zero at  $p < .01$ . The same logic applies to the rest of the indirect effects results obtained from the bootstrap procedure.

paths from identification with company to ongoing interaction ( $\beta = .20$ ) through engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication and use of organizational media were significant at  $p = .002$  (95% CI: .134, .276).

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of relational satisfaction and organizational reputation on customers' supportive communication behaviors, as well as the critical mediation role of identification with company on such effects.

The research found that customers' relational satisfaction with a company increases the extent to which they engage in positive word-of-mouth communication not only directly but also indirectly via identification with company. These results are consistent with a number of past studies on the associations among relational satisfaction, engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication (e.g., Ki & Hon, 2007b; Mittal, Kumar, & Tsiros, 1999; Reynolds & Beatty, 1999; Swan & Oliver, 1989), and identification with company (Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Results of this study reveal that the more customers perceive the reputation of the organization to be favorable, the more likely they are to communicate positively to others about it. The finding is consistent with previous studies which show that favorable organizational reputation influences publics' supportive behaviors toward organizations (e.g., Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & van Riel, 2003). The result complements Dye's (2000) suggestion that organizational reputation, which is formed on the basis of the salient characteristics, distinctiveness, or uniqueness of an organization, may lead customers to engage in positive word-of-mouth communication, because the things people talk about are in general "unique in some respect" (p. 140).

Regarding company identification, this study found strong effects of identification with a company on positive word-of-mouth communication behavior. The finding is consistent with previous studies (Ahearne et al., 2005; Bhattacharya et al., 1995; Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). According to Ahearne et al. (2005), customers who "identify with a company are likely to focus on tasks that benefit the whole organization rather than on purely self-interested ones, often referred to as extra-role behaviors" (p. 577). This finding is in line with the claim made by Ahearne et al. (2005) that suggests that engagement in extra-role behaviors, such as engaging in positive word-of-mouth, allows customers to express their identification to others.

Results of this study found that relational satisfaction was almost unrelated to customers' use of organizational media. Only organizational reputation and identification with company were found to be related to use of organizational media, with the latter showing the stronger effects. As expected, the findings showed that the more customers identify with the company, the more likely they are to pay attention to messages sent out from the organization. This offers support for Harwood's (1999) finding that individuals who identify with certain groups turned to media in order to "strengthen their identification with a particular social group and/or make that identification more positive" (p. 123).

Interestingly, even though customers' favorable perception of organizational reputation resulted in more use of organizational media, their perception of relational satisfaction did not show significant effects on use of organizational media. To a certain extent, the study confirms a premise of the classic observation in political communication—that individuals are more likely to use mediated messages when there is consistency between their existing beliefs and content of mediated messages (e.g., Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947; Klapper, 1960; Lazarsfeld et al., 1944).

An explanation for the strong association between organizational reputation and use of organizational media may be that the topics relevant to organizational reputation may have been more salient in organizational media, such as promotions of the company being on *Fortune* magazine's list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For consistently since the magazine began publishing the list in 1998, or it being the best supermarket among 54 US supermarket chains, as reported by *Consumer Reports*. Thus, customers who perceived the reputation of the company to be favorable may have paid more attention to the messages from the organization. However, in the case of relational satisfaction, this study found that such an association might be less salient than organizational reputation. That is, the topics relevant to relational satisfaction may have been less salient in organizational media, giving less opportunity for those who are personally very satisfied with the relationship they have with the company to be exposed to such content. Still, this finding should be observed with caution. This study measured the use of organizational media and not the specific content of organizational media. Direct examinations of an association between relational satisfaction and content-specific organizational media would provide an important validation of the current interpretation.

We did not find a direct relationship between relational satisfaction and use of organizational media; however, we did find an indirect relationship between these two variables through the mediation of identification with the company. Relational satisfaction increased customers' use of organizational media only through an increased identification with the company.

The recognition of this intervening pathway increases our ability to explicate the key process behind customers' use of organizational media.

In addition, one of the important findings of this study was the significant effects of customers' communication behaviors on their ongoing interaction with the organization that occurred through their frequent patronage to the organization. The more customers talk positively and frequently about the organization to others and the more they pay attention to the information on the organization's Web site, e-mails, advertisements, and organization-produced magazines, the more likely they are to interact with the organization through frequently patronage to the organization. The results suggest that customers' engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication and their use of organizational media can be seen as part of their supportive behaviors toward the organization. Furthermore, through these supportive communication behaviors, relational satisfaction, organizational reputation, and identification with company showed indirect association with ongoing interaction. In particular, use of organizational media turned out to be a strong mediator connecting organizational reputation and company identification with ongoing interaction. This is an interesting finding, and it offers some useful insights into the process through which organizational reputation and company identification may affect interaction between an organization and its publics.

This study provides the following critical implications for scholars and practitioners. Rather than focusing on organization–public relationships (i.e., relational satisfaction) and organizational reputation separately as previous studies have done, this study integrates these two concepts into a model and examines their effects on a public's supportive behaviors. Hence, this study contributes to a theoretical body of knowledge in public relations by providing insights into the complementary roles both relational satisfaction and organizational reputation play in demonstrating public relations effectiveness.

In addition, this study contributes to the public relations literature by providing evidence concerning how identification with company can be applied in public relations to demonstrate public relations effectiveness. By identifying a potentially beneficial route from identification with company to supportive communication behaviors, the study demonstrates how pertinent and applicable the concept is to public relations, thereby expanding the domain of public relations. The study suggests that finding ways for customers to identify with the company should be one of the key objectives for public relations practitioners.

This study has its limitations. First, as with any cross-sectional research, some attention is due to the causal direction of the associations in this structural equation model. In this model, particular concerns surface between organizational reputation and use of organizational media. It seems logical that customers' favorable perceptions of the reputation of the organization

may lead them to pay more attention to messages about it as a self-initiated strategy to reinforce their own perceptions of organizational reputation. However, reversed causal paths cannot be entirely ruled out. Thus, it is entirely possible, and even likely, that the association between organizational reputation and use of organizational media is a reciprocal one. Nonetheless, the reciprocal relationship with such effects over time is likely to be mutually reinforcing and cumulative (Slater, 2007). A longitudinal study in which organizational reputation and use of organizational media are measured over time (as a panel study) could identify the reinforcing and cumulative effects between these concepts. Second, even though relational satisfaction scale items were meant to assess the customers' personal satisfaction regarding the relationship they have with the organization, they were phrased with "customers like me." We acknowledge that there can be occasions when an individual could personally feel differently from how other customers like the individual feel, as an anonymous reviewer has pointed out. It would probably be most accurate to measure these items using first person. Third, ongoing interaction was measured with a single item. Therefore, the reliability of the measure is not guaranteed for this variable, and results should be viewed with this limitation in mind. We recognize that it would be desirable to measure the ongoing interaction variable with multiple items such as recency and the level of monetary spending.<sup>8</sup>

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### Appendix: Measurement Item

| <i>Variable (label)</i>   | <i>Item (label)</i>  |
|---------------------------|--|
| Relational satisfaction   | 1) Both Wegmans and customers like me benefit from the relationship.<br>2) Customers like me are satisfied with our interactions with Wegmans.<br>3) Customers like me are happy with Wegmans.<br>4) Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship Wegmans has established with customers like me.<br>5) Customers like me enjoy dealing with Wegmans.<br>6) Wegmans satisfies needs of customers like me.<br>7) Customers like me feel we are important to Wegmans.<br>8) In general, some value has been accomplished by Wegmans for customers like me. |
| Organizational reputation |  |
| Quality of products       | 1) Wegmans carries quality products.<br>2) Wegmans carries a wide variety of products.<br>3) Wegmans sells products that are dependable.<br>4) Wegmans' stores are pleasant.   |
| Quality of services       | 5) Wegmans is customer-focused.<br>6) Wegmans has excellent customer service.<br>7) Wegmans tries to understand customers' needs.<br>8) Wegmans handles customer complaints well.  |
| Workplace environment     | 9) Wegmans is well-managed.<br>10) Wegmans looks like a good company to work for.<br>11) Wegmans has good employees.<br>12) Wegmans looks like a company that treats its employees well.   |

(Continued)

| <i>Variable (label)</i>                            | <i>Item (label)</i>   |
|--|---|
| Customers' identification with company             | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) When people criticize Wegmans, it feels like a personal insult.</li> <li>2) I am very interested in what others think about Wegmans.</li> <li>3) When I talk about Wegmans, I usually say "we" rather than "they."</li> <li>4) Wegmans' successes are my successes.</li> <li>5) When someone praises Wegmans, it feels like a personal compliment.</li> <li>6) If a story in the media criticized Wegmans, I would feel embarrassed.</li> </ol> |
| Engagement in positive word-of-mouth communication |   |
| Word-of-mouth activity                             | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) I mention Wegmans to others quite frequently.</li> <li>2) I've told more people about Wegmans than I've told about most other grocery stores.</li> <li>3) I seldom miss an opportunity to tell others about Wegmans.</li> <li>4) I've told many people about Wegmans.</li> <li>5) When I tell others about Wegmans, I tend to talk about it in great detail.</li> <li>6) Once I get talking about Wegmans, it's hard for me to stop.</li> </ol> |
| Word-of-mouth praise                               | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) I speak positively of Wegmans.</li> <li>2) I recommend Wegmans to others.</li> <li>3) If I talk to others about Wegmans, my comments are generally positive.</li> <li>4) I encourage others to shop at Wegmans.</li> <li>5) When the topic of grocery stores comes up in conversation, I go out of my way to recommend Wegmans.</li> </ol>  |
| Use of organizational media                        | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) I pay close attention to weekly e-mails from Wegmans called Wegmans Fresh News.</li> </ol>  |
| Use of organizational media (continued)            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2) I pay close attention to Wegmans' weekly ads/flyers.</li> <li>3) I pay close attention to Wegmans' monthly magazine called <i>Menu</i>.</li> <li>4) I pay close attention to information on Wegmans' Web site.</li> </ol>   |

*Note.* For all measurement items, 7-point scale was used (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *somewhat disagree*, 4 = *neutral*, 5 = *somewhat agree*, 6 = *agree*, 7 = *strongly agree*).

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