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# Communicating global inequalities: How LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs use social media as public relations

Nathian Shae Rodriguez\*

Texas Tech University, College of Media and Communication, Box 43082, Lubbock, TX 79409-3082, United States

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### ABSTRACT

The plight and struggles of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) refugees and asylum seekers from around the globe often go unheard. Currently, at least 75 countries have specific regulations persecuting LGBTIs. Without protection, these global citizens are forced to seek asylum in other countries. This paper investigates how LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs (Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration and International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission) are using Facebook and Twitter to build organizational–public relationships. Research provided here builds upon previous research in organizational communication and NGOs by supporting the use of social media messages as functions of information, community and action. The current study provides a more nuanced examination of those functions and establishes an affective classification within the information function to help foster social change by LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the conventional public relations measures of cognitive learning, affective responses and resulting behaviors are manifested within these online functions as well. The current study also helps further the concept of queer social capital. The social media messages linked more to LGBTI-specific entities around the world than non-LGBTI organizations.

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## 1. Introduction

Members of the LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) community continue to face persecution in some areas around the world. As of May 2015, over 76 countries in the world (in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Oceania) had laws that deemed homosexual acts illegal (Carroll & Itaborahy, 2015). Castigations include imprisonment, fines, sanctions, beatings, lashings, and even death (ILGA, 2014). Jamaica currently criminalizes anal intercourse, as well as any form of male same-sex intimacy, and imposes a maximum sentence of ten years in prison with or without hard labor (J-FLAG, 2015). Russia and Lithuania currently have laws banning the propaganda of homosexuality, but do not directly mention homosexual acts. Algeria and Nigeria both have similar anti-propaganda laws, however, also prohibit same-sex relationships and sexual behaviors (Carroll & Itaborahy, 2015). One of the most focused-on areas in the world for human rights activists is the Middle East and North African region, also referred to as the MENA region. The MENA region includes eight countries where homosexual acts/behavior can be punished by death, including Draconian methods like stoning and

\* Corresponding author.  
E-mail address: [Nathian.rodriguez@ttu.edu](mailto:Nathian.rodriguez@ttu.edu)

beheading. Only five of those countries (Mauritania, Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) actually implement the death penalty (Berkowitz, Cameron, & Johnson, 2013). Iraq and Somalia do not employ the death penalty uniformly across the country, however it is enacted provincially (Carroll & Itaborahy, 2015).

To date, nearly 2.79 billion people live in countries where being gay can lead to imprisonment or death—that is almost seven times the number of LGBTIs who live in countries with same-sex marriage (Ball, 2014). Such “human rights violations” have forced hundreds to flee their countries to seek asylum and refuge in other countries. Currently, the U.S. recognizes persecution due to sexual orientation as grounds for refugee status (U. Immigration, 2010). In 2011 alone, 81,372 refugees entered the U.S. legally (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). The number of people granted asylum annually based on sexual orientation or gender identity is probably less than 500; of those about 300 actually disclose their status as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer (Forced Migration Review, 2014).

There is a need for LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs that support these refugees in a variety of ways. Most LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers do not arrive with family members or friends. They are fleeing violence from relatives, community members, and police so they often have no relational ties when arriving in the country of asylum. Furthermore, they may choose to remain segregated from those who share the same country of origin. Fellow country-men/women may be fleeing for other reasons aside from sexual orientation and may harbor the same anti-homosexual beliefs and attitudes. Many LGBTI refugees report threats from other refugees during the migration process and self-impose isolation due to deep-seated fears (Forced Migration Review, 2014).

LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs have trained staff, personnel, and volunteers that understand and identify with this distinctive group of refugees. LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers who understand the English language and are computer literate often seek out communities of choice. There may be something they read or view online, see on TV or hear on the radio that makes them believe a certain region in the world or country would be more accepting of their lifestyle. LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs help refugees find particular locations with positive legal environments, established LGBTI communities, and a critical mass of other refugees; they also aid in the acculturation process (Forced Migration Review, 2014).

Because the needs of LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers are unique and differ from other types of refugees, it is important to examine how NGOs use public relations strategies to acquire volunteers, recruit employees and garner monetary support for their endeavors. This paper seeks to investigate the use of social media, specifically Twitter and Facebook, by LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs for such purposes. Previous research has investigated conventional PR measures and how they've been utilized by NGOs on social networking sites (Blumell & Gilmore, 2014; Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011; Hyunjin, Kim, & Sung-Un, 2009; Kang & Norton, 2004; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012), however there has been no prior research to-date on NGOs that focus solely on the LGBTI community and organizational–public relationships. The current research will aid in filling the gap in the literature.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Online organizational communication

Although there are various definitions of organizational communication, a seminal article by Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) defines an organizational–public relationship as those relationships “represented by patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange and linkage between an organization and its publics” (p. 18). Traditionally, organizations have been using public relations strategies in everyday business life to solve problems and foster relationships with stakeholders and publics (Hallahan, 2008). These relationships are usually weaker than ties with friends or family members, however still derive benefits to both the organization and the stakeholder/public (Preece, 2000).

Public relations (PR) researchers have examined the Internet and its capability to build relationships between organizations and publics (Ma & Yuen, 2011; Murgolo-Poore, Pitt, Berthon, & Prendegast, 2003). By instituting these relationships, organizations are creating a basis for excellence and customer fulfillment (Grunig and Dozier, 2002). The establishment and maintenance of online relationships by organizations is often referred to as “net relations” (Spataro, 1998). The conventional public relations measures of relationships include commitment, control mutuality, communality, trust and satisfaction (Hallahan, 2008).

Some PR researchers suggest the three traditional measures of cognitive learning, affective responses and resulting behaviors are also important in measuring relationship building online (Hallahan, 2008). Cognitive learning is the degree to which a public obtains general awareness and understanding of an organization. The learning process begins with pre-attention, then moves to focal attention, comprehension, interpretation, and finally evaluation (Greenwald & Leavitt, 1984). Cognitive learning can be measured using recall and thought-listing procedures (Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981). Affective responses, also known as emotional responses, are the feelings that lead to the formation of positive or negative attitudes toward the organization. Hallahan (2008) argues that experiences that generate positive assessments directly contribute to relationship building and can be attitudinally measured by liking/disliking, relevance, identification, affinity, and intent. Resulting behaviors encompass any behavioral actions on the part of the public that benefits or contributes to an organization's mission or goals, for example sharing content (Chase and Shulock, 2001) or becoming a brand advocate (Gordon, 1998). Behavioral responses are measured in the user's engagement in said behaviors (Hallahan, 2008).

Previous studies investigating the use of organizational communication by NGOs have found little success in utilizing Web 1.0 technology (websites, hyperlinks) to interact or engage with stakeholders (Hill & White, 2000; Kent, Taylor, &

White, 2003; Saxton, Guo, & Brown, 2007). Technological limitations and minimal staff expertise in online platforms may be a couple of the reasons this endeavor proved unproductive (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Web 2.0 (social networking sites) has proven more successful with its capacity for interactivity, accessibility, affordability, ubiquity and ease. For the purpose of this paper, Web 2.0 is defined as a set of current-generation (often free) Internet technologies that are highly social, encouraging users to manipulate and interact with content in new ways (Wolcott, 2007).

Researchers have investigated the use of Web 2.0, specifically social networking sites, and their use by NGOs as a tool for interaction and engagement (Blumell & Gilmore, 2014; Briones et al., 2011; Kang & Norton, 2004; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Seo, Kim & Yang, 2009). Prior research has found two major organizational functions for Web 2.0: information sharing and dialogic relationship-building (Jansen, Zhang, Sobel, & Chowdury, 2009; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). A survey of representatives from 75 transnational NGOs based in the United States found that the two most important functions to an NGO are promoting the organizations image and fundraising (Seo et al., 2009).

Not only is social networking aiding in the communication between an organization and its public, but also in communication with stakeholders, volunteers, and mass media (Waters, 2007) to form and strengthen relationships, build trust and organize constituents (Saxton & Guo, 2011). The two-way dialogic components of social media provide an excellent opportunity to create organizational–public relationships by allowing input from the public (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

## 2.2. Social movements and online public relations

Daymon and Demetrious (2013) define public relations as “a communicative activity used by organizations to intervene socially in and between competing discourses in order to facilitate a favorable position within a global context” (p. 3). Social media has been used as a public relations tool by social movements to achieve their goals (Adi & Moloney, 2012) by informing and motivating supporters of the movement (Adi, 2015). Use of social media platforms to distribute messages, specifically Facebook and Twitter, has been found to relate directly to a PR campaign’s behavioral goals (Paek, Hove, Jung, & Cole, 2013). Publics of organizations tended to like, share, and communicate the messages they encountered online. This behavior, however, has been found to persist among those social media users who are already committed followers of the organization and cause (Adi, 2015; Sommerfeldt, 2011).

The asylum-specific NGO is similar to any other organization in broad comparisons, however, it is also very much different in its use of communication to help foster and promote social change. Online platforms such as social networking sites allow organizations of social change to produce and transmit messages through technological infrastructures made up of publics and stakeholders. The bigger the network, the more the messages get seen and passed around. Also, the more members in the network, the more legitimacy the organization has within the world-wide community, which is necessary to achieve collective understanding (Blumer, 1971).

The use of the Internet and social networking has helped propel the visibility and representations of social movements to broader audience. The protests of the global justice movement in the cities of Seattle (1999) and Genoa (2001) were among the first social movements to utilize the Internet for instant coverage and perspective targeted toward a global audience (Mattoni & Teune, 2014). The Internet placed control of images and dissemination within the hands of the activists and help highlight social movements from distant regions of the world (Atkinson, 2010).

Perhaps the greatest advantage of social media platforms is the ability for social activists and organizations of distinctive political, cultural, and social contexts to be able to create their own voice and gaze on their respective social mobilizations (Mattoni & Tuene, 2014). The asylum-specific NGO is able to utilize the Internet and social networking platforms to create and disseminate their tailored messages of global inequalities and LGBTI persecution. This study seeks to add nuance to how these NGOs use social media messages as functions of organizational–public relationships. Although the main focus of the current study is on organizational communication, it is important to note that scholars have studied how social media has impacted public relations (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008; Hinson, 2012) and how organizations use social media platforms to achieve dialogic communication (Briones et al., 2011; Inauen & Schoeneborn, 2014; Men & Tsai, 2012; Sommerfeldt, Kent, & Taylor, 2012), strategic communication (Kelleher, 2006; Rodriguez & Gilmore, 2015), social capital (Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009), and social corporate responsibility (De Bakker, & Hellsten, 2013; Etter, 2013).

## 2.3. A previous typology for tweet functions

Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) quantitatively examined the Twitter utilization practices of 100 of the largest nonprofit organizations in the United States and found three key functions of microblogging updates: information, community, and action. When compared to traditional measures of organization–public relationships, this typology includes only tweets that appeal to cognitive learning and behavioral responses. The typology neglects affective responses. Furthermore, the typology only includes one classification category under information, while community has four categories and action has seven categories. The authors reason that this one, inclusive category includes information about the organization’s activities, highlights from events, or any other news, facts, reports or information relevant to an organization’s stakeholders. Arguably, this omits any detailed practices of what specific information is disseminated by the organization. The typology also doesn’t provide insight to the global region of interest or where the content originates in each tweet. It also only focuses solely on Twitter and neglects Facebook and other social media platforms. The current study advocates for a more nuanced treatment

**Table 1**

Social media message functions.

Information ( <i>n</i> = 419, 55%)		
LGBTI/refugee/asylee human rights	<i>n</i> = 193	25%
Government/legislation	<i>n</i> = 148	19.1%
LGBTI/refugee/asylee personal stories	<i>n</i> = 78	10.2%
Report or study	<i>n</i> = 32	4.2%
Community ( <i>n</i> = 247, 32%)		
Events	<i>n</i> = 151	19.6%
Congratulations/recognition	<i>n</i> = 78	10.1%
Response to post/tweet	<i>n</i> = 10	1.3%
Memes of encouragement	<i>n</i> = 8	1.0%
Action ( <i>n</i> = 105, 12.5%)		
Survey/proposal	<i>n</i> = 32	4.2%
Donating	<i>n</i> = 23	3.0%
Petition/follow/support	<i>n</i> = 20	2.6%
Volunteer/employment	<i>n</i> = 17	2.0%
Scholarship/grant/funding	<i>n</i> = 7	0.9%
Voting	<i>n</i> = 6	0.8%

of the information function. A subsequent, inductive process is necessary to uncover further comprehensive, in-depth data. Therefore, the following research questions will guide the analysis of the current research:

- RQ1: How are LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs using social media messages (tweets/posts) as functions of organizational–public relationships?
- RQ2: What global region did the NGO tweet/post about the most?
- RQ3: Where does the social media message direct the user?

### 3. Method

Five LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs were identified in the United States: Immigration Equality (New York, NY), Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration (San Francisco, CA), Friends New Underground Railroad (Olympus, WA), International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission (New York, NY), and the LGBT Asylum Support Task Force (Worcester, MA). Three of these NGOs were excluded from the analysis of this paper. Immigration Equality is an organization that only handles legal services for LGBT refugees, unlike the other four that support all aspects of the refugee/asylum relocation process. Friends New Underground Railroad did not start utilizing Facebook until January of 2014 and the LGBT Asylum Support Task Force did not start utilizing Twitter until September of 2013. Since the analysis focused on 2013, for reasons outlined below, both NGOs were excluded from this study.

Facebook posts and tweets from January 1, 2013 through December 31, 2013 from Organization for Refuge, Asylum & Migration (ORAM) and International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) were analyzed. It is important to note that IGLHRC changed the name of their organization to OutRight Action International in September, 2015 to reflect inclusion of the total LGBTIQ spectrum. However, since the tweets and Facebook posts were still listed under IGLHRC in 2013, the current study will refer to the organization as IGLHRC. 2013 was chosen due to major activity in same-sex marriage and gay rights legislation. Most notable were the passage of anti-gay laws in Russia (June, 30) and Uganda (December, 20). Also, the legalization of same-sex marriage occurred in New Zealand (April, 10), Uruguay (May, 3), Brazil (May, 14), France (May, 18), and England (July, 17) in 2013. Although there was a significant rise in the number of countries that implemented same-sex marriage equality, there was also an alarming amount of countries that attempted to criminalize same-sex intimacy and relationships through homosexual propaganda laws (Carroll & Itaborahy, 2015). Due to both the positive and the negative trends in same-sex rights during the year, 2013 was chosen as the time-frame for the study. The unit of analysis for the study is each individual post or tweet from ORAM and IGLHRC in 2013. A total of 771 total messages were coded. This included 85 Facebook posts and 155 tweets from ORAM and 79 Facebook posts and 492 tweets from IGLHRC.

An inductive, qualitative textual analysis was performed on all 771 tweets and posts. The structure of the codebook was modeled after Lovejoy and Saxton (2012). The data was first grouped into deductive topics that were modified as more topics inductively materialized. In order to make sure the codes were theory-driven, the topics were reviewed halfway through the coding process. After 50% of the sample was coded, the researcher then revised the entire codebook to insure reliability (see DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch (2011) for qualitative reliability). The goal was to be clear and concise, while still capturing the latent meaning of each social meaning message. The inductive topics were also quantified to extrapolate which functions were most utilized by the NGOs (see Table 1). Coding was organized into information, community, action, global region, and message content categories, each of which is discussed in the subsections below.



## 4. Results

### 4.1. Information

Regarding RQ1, how are LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs using social media messages (tweets/posts) as functions of organizational–public relationships, over half (55%) of the social media messages' purpose was to inform. Categories within this function include informing stakeholders about LGBTI refugee/asylum seeker's human rights, affective personal stories, government and legislation, or about a report/study that had been released. The human rights category included messages that informed of any human rights violation including physical violence, imprisonment, or death. IGLHRC tweeted, "To India: Stop Criminalizing People Who Are Not Criminals by Grace Poore" on Dec. 17 with a link to a *Buzzfeed* story over the issue. On Nov. 27, the organization tweeted a link to a South African newspaper with the text, "Man gets 22 years for attack on lesbian." Similarly, on August 6, the NGO tweeted, "Murders of transgender women in Turkey and unacceptable behavior of the diplomatic Embassy of Turkey in Athens." Messages like these helped inform about the persecution and violence aimed at LGBTIs around the world.

The information function also included messages about progress and pride. In July IGLHRC posted on their Facebook:

In February 2014, Russian LGBT-Network launched a new program to support the survivors of hate crimes against lesbians, gays, and bisexual and transgender people, and to LGBT activists suffered because of their activities. As a part of this program, the Network provides legal, psychological, financial and other kinds of help.

On August 5, IGLHRC tweeted, "2nd Annual Gay Pride Parade Held in Uganda" with a link to an African LGBTI website. Messages such as these informed followers about how LGBTI rights were advancing around the world. It gave a sense that the NGO's endeavors were fruitful and the goal for both LGBTI and human rights was one that was obtainable.

Another category of the information function was LGBTI refugee/asylum seeker personal stories. These stories included pre-relocation and post-relocation stories. On December 19, IGLHRC tweeted a link to a *Buzzfeed* article with the text, "Why Some LGBT Youths In Jamaica Are Forced To Call A Sewer Home." On September 20, ORAM posted on their Facebook page:

Nigerian Gay rights activist and asylee Michael Ighodaro: "if your family – brothers or sisters, parents – know that you are gay and they do not turn you in, then they too can go to jail for up to 10 years" #Huffpostgay

The post linked to a *Huffington Post* article that described the harsh conditions Nigerian LGBTIs had to endure in their country, including persecution from their own family members. Another tweet by ORAM on April 30 mentioned the horrible post-relocation conditions in a refugee camp and linked to another LGBTI NGO:

Moses was only 17 when he left his home in Kachin state in northern Myanmar and headed to Thailand, hoping for a more tolerant environment for homosexuals. Without valid paperwork, however, he found himself stuck inside a refugee camp where homophobia, discrimination and abuse were rife.

Although the information function is most closely related to cognitive learning, posts in this category played on affective responses from the NGO's stakeholders and publics. The organizations utilized these types of tweets/posts to invoke feelings of empathy and sympathy for LGBTI refugees/asylum seekers, thereby encouraging people to identify and relate to these individuals. This affective category is a vital strategy for advocacy among organizations that are part of social movements.

Another category within the information function was to inform about government and legislation. Although a few messages focused on U.S. legislation, a majority of tweets/posts focused on foreign legislature. On December 30, IGLHR tweeted, "Now on NPR: Uganda Passes Anti-Gay Bill That Includes Life In Prison. . ." that included a link to an NPR news story on the law. On November 21, IGLHRC posted on its Facebook page:

A copy of the legislation, which was obtained by The Associated Press on Friday, indicates that President Yahya Jammeh signed it on Oct. 9, though no government officials have yet publicly notified the country of the new law. Jammeh, one of Africa's most vocal anti-gay leaders, instructed gays and lesbians in 2008 to leave the country or risk decapitation.

On May 22, IGLHRC tweeted "Solid round-up piece on why today's expected ruling in Malaysia is so important." The tweet included a link to an Al Jazeera news story that provided information and insight on transgender rights. The NGOs used these types of messages not only to make the public aware of legislative decisions in foreign countries, but also to explain them in layman's terms. As an advocacy group for equal rights and the LGBTI social movement, the NGO calls attention to the sources of subjugation and tries to influence publics to help change the power structure that inequalities are built upon.

The NGOs also frequently tweeted/posted national and global surveys or reports on human rights or LGBTI issues. ORAM posted to its Facebook page on June 5:

The Pew Research Center, as part of a fascinating new report on global attitudes toward homosexuality, asked people in 39 different countries a deceptively straightforward question: "Should society accept homosexuality?" People could answer yes, no or decline the question.

The post then linked to a *Washington Post* article that included a story about African and Middle Eastern countries generally scoring low on acceptance, while Western and Latin countries tended to score higher. On May 14, IGLHRC posted

on its Facebook, “Our groundbreaking study is now available online! Let us know what surprises you most about the report’s findings, and how you will use them for advocacy.” By circulating reports such as these, the NGO is able to keep its public informed about national and global trends and the progress (or digress) of human rights. It also, much like the progress and pride category above, gives the sentiment that there is work being done to combat LGBTI persecution. It reinforces a clear dichotomy of good and bad, thus enabling the inequalities to be easily highlighted and addressed.

#### 4.2. Community

The community function was manifested in about a third (32%) of the social media messages. This function included the categories of congratulations/recognition, events, response to messages, and memes of encouragement. The prevalent category in this function was that of events. The NGOs utilized this function primarily to invite stakeholders to protests, rallies, fundraisers and conferences. On June 22 ORAM posted on Facebook:

Want to join us for SF Pride parade on Sunday June 30th? We’ll be wearing T-shirts with Marconi Calinda’s beautiful and colorful art! Please RSVP to with your name, number of people and T-shirt size(s)

Also, during and after the event, the NGO would post pictures and live updates on social media. This awards those that cannot attend (or chose not to attend) the event in person a chance to transcend physical limitations and partake in the event through a virtual presence. By live tweeting/posting, the organization is able to foster a sense of community between those who attended and those who couldn’t. It’s advocacy without direct participation.

Another category of the community function was that of congratulations and recognition. The NGO would highlight individuals around the world of different stature on their social media platforms. On March 21, IGLHRC posted on its Facebook, “A much deserved award for Alice Nkom! Congratulations, and thank you for your tireless work!” with a link to the BBC which contained a full story. On April 17, the organization again posted to its Facebook page, “Congratulations to Engender Rights Centre for Justice (ERCJ) of Zambia and Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe (GALZ) of Zimbabwe for being awarded the 2014 ARASA Human Rights, HIV and TB Award!” The post linked to another LGBTI NGO that featured the story. ORAM tweeted, “Thanks @andersoncooper @AC360. Do #LGBTIrefugees s fleeing 4 their lives deserve ink too? If so, pls RT” on June 25 and “@MetaGrrrl Thank you for the support and generosity! You’re the best!” on Dec. 24. The NGO’s retweeted activists, celebrities and everyday citizens to create one giant community online. This recognition also acts as an incentive for stakeholders and publics to engage with the social movement, a motivation to be publically identified and acknowledged throughout the network.

#### 4.3. Action

An action function was utilized in 12.5% of the tweets, encouraging individuals to partake in actions such as voting, donating, volunteering, applying for jobs, supporting or following another NGO, filling out a survey/petition, or completing a grant/funding/scholarship application. Behavior that directly benefits the organization is the ultimate measure of organizational–public relationships (Hallahan, 2008). On December 9, ORAM posted on Facebook, “For #HumanRightsDay, protect #LGBTIrefugees now. Please share widely and give generously: LGBT refugees deserve our protection. . . .” The post provided a link back to the NGO’s website to donate money. The same scenario occurred on IGLHRC’s Twitter feed on May 13 when the organization tweeted, “Thanks to all of our generous donors, we’ve raised \$95,000 tonight!! Will you help us reach \$100k?” with a link to the IGLHRC website.

Social media messages also asked for volunteers and employees. On November 24, IGLHRC posted on their Facebook page: “Hey New Yorkers, want to meet LGBT activists from around the world? Have some free time December 7th through 10th? Become an IGLHRC volunteer!” On Oct. 29, IGLHRC tweeted, “Know someone who would be a great addition to our Africa program staff? We’re hiring a Program Officer.” These messages beseeched actions on the part of social media users to not only volunteer or apply for employment, but also to distribute the message within their social circles.

Another category of the action function is the broadcast of scholarships, grants or funding opportunities. IGLHRC tweeted “Latin America: Targeted Request for Proposals for \$20,000 funding opportunities with @amfAR GMT Initiative.” Then on September 13, the NGO tweeted “FELLOWSHIP: Oak Institute for the Study of Int’l Human Rights at @ColbyCollege w/Focus on Gender and Human Rights. A similar category for surveys and proposals was also uncovered. IGLHRC tweeted, “Call for Submissions for TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly 2.1 (2015)’ in May and “Call for Proposals: The WorldPride Human Rights Conference 2014” on April 22. Both tweets contained links to the respective journal’s website. In February, the organization posted on “Facebook Survey: Gender-based violence, HIV and the post 2015 agenda” with an active link. ORAM tweeted “Dear #LGBTIrefugee supporters: please help us make a tough decision by sharing your input via a two-question survey” on August 22.

This function also included a category of tweets/posts that asked for social media users to follow or support other NGOs or to ask their friends and family to do the same. In January, ORAM posted on its Facebook page:

We are only 27 LIKES away from reaching 1000 STRONG in pushing for greater protections for LGBTI refugees. Please help us reach our goal by inviting five friends to LIKE our page today! Thanks everyone for all your support in building this historic movement!

**Table 2**  
External links for tweets/posts.

External site	<i>n</i>	% of total external sites
LGBTI-targeted online resource	<i>n</i> = 153	32.80%
Mass mainstream media	<i>n</i> = 72	15.25%
LGBTI advocacy group	<i>n</i> = 66	14.00%
LGBTI-specific NGO	<i>n</i> = 58	12.25%
Any other online resource	<i>n</i> = 56	12.00%
Any other NGO	<i>n</i> = 31	7.00%
Ghost links	<i>n</i> = 19	2.5%
A refugee/asylee specific NGO	<i>n</i> = 10	2.1%
Government agency	<i>n</i> = 10	2.1%

Note. Percentage is out of *N* = 475, the number of external links contained in social media messages.

Content like this helped increase the number of people who would ultimately see the NGOs messages and support the organization, be it in activism or monetary donations. It is a way to recruit individuals into the social movement, thereby enhancing its power through numbers. Another post by IGLHRC on February 7 read, “If today’s news about LGBT activists being arrested in Moscow and St. Petersburg has you wondering what you can do to help, here are 5 actions you can take. Please share!” Here, the NGO is summoning brand ambassadors for the organization. Not only do the publics involved become members of the social movement, but they also help add legitimacy and build trust. The movement is like a snowball and grows larger.

#### 4.4. Global regions

In regards to RQ2, what global region did the NGO tweet/post about the most, research found that the NGOs’ messages focused more (13.6%) on North America, specifically the United States. As mentioned above, most of the messages focused not only on disseminating information about injustices and legislation, but also about community events, protests and fundraisers. Since the primary stakeholders of the NGOs are volunteers and potential donors, intuitively this makes sense that the majority of tweets/posts would focus on the U.S. Coupled with the fact that 96% of the messages were in English, the target audience for these messages were U.S. citizens who could affect legislation in by voting, lobbying or protesting and/or could potentially donate money by attending events thrown by the NGO.

In terms of global inequalities, the most mentioned global regions were Africa (12.3%), the Middle East (10.1%), and Asia (10%). This might be due to the fact that these regions still impose harsh sanctions against LGBTIs. As mentioned in the introduction, eight countries in the MENA region impose the death penalty for same-sex intimacy. Since the laws and religious regulations in foreign countries are unobtrusive issues, the NGOs used social media to disseminate information about harsh living conditions and persecution of LGBTIs across the globe. While there is still inequalities in the U.S. (examined in more detail in the discussion section), there are potentially more deadly threats to LGBTIs in regions of the world where the power structure favors a more heteronormative and dangerous regime of authority. The messages disseminated throughout the NGO’s network advance social movements by creating a form of counter-power that aids in reshaping human thought and behavior (Castells, 2009). The NGO’s messages disrupt dominant discourse and organize key publics around a common interest, in this case social change. Without the aid of social networking by the NGO, LGBTIs in these regions may not be able to communicate injustices on their own (either by choice, lack of resources, and/or authoritative restriction).

#### 4.5. Message direction

In regards to RQ3, where does the social media message direct the user, over 61% of the messages directed users right back to the NGO’s respective website. This was predominately manifested in tweets/posts about donations, reports and refugee/asylum seeker’s stories. NGOs used social media messages to direct traffic back to their website for other engagement features like videos, online donation banks, stories, and interviews. Only 38.4% of the links directed users to external sites. This engagement is also a measurement of success that can be evaluated by the NGOs.

Of that 38.4%, a majority of the messages included links that directed users to LGBTI-targeted websites (see Table 2). The next largest groups of external sites included LGBTI advocacy groups, LGBTI-specific NGOs, and the mainstream mass media. By keeping the links directed back to the NGO and to other LGBTI-specific entities, ORAM and IGLHRC create a sort of “LGBTI social capital.” All the information, news stories, and events seem to remain within a close-knit consortium reflecting what Putnam (2000) has termed as bonding, relationships or associations within a specific group. Putnam’s view on social capital has been criticized as reinforcing heteronormative social norms (Molyneux, 2002) and some scholars have challenged his geographic situated focus (Sullivan et al., 2002). The current study’s findings add to those of scholars (Cronin & King, 2014; Wakeford, 2000) who have queered the conceptualization of social capital and found LGBTs’ use of social networks and the Internet to transcend terrestrial confines for political and personal networking purposes.

Interestingly, over 78% of the tweets/posts were original posts or tweets created by the NGO itself. Only 22% were retweets or reposts. That means that the NGOs were active in researching information, news, and events and then disseminating it to its followers. This builds upon previous research that found social media allows for idiosyncratic manifestations of particular social mobilizations (Mattoni and Teune, 2014). The NGO also created events and live streams to engage their publics and foster relationships, thus adding to the queer social capital discussed above.

## 5. Discussion

Technological advances in Web 2.0 have produced opportunities for NGOs to interact and engage with stakeholders in significantly different ways than previous methods. Consistent with the findings of Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs used the information function more frequently than community and action functions. Both ORAM and IGLHRC use social media to disseminate information about human rights and legislation in other countries more than any function. Contrary to Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) who found messages' sole purpose was to inform and had no secondary agenda, the current research found affective response as an ancillary intention. Both NGOs examined in the current study utilized personal stories of LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers to invoke feelings of empathy and sympathy. Just as Demetrious (2008) claims public relations is ideologically invested to include some sectors over others (grassroots activism in her example), Lovejoy and Saxton's (2012) typology does not uniformly theorize or address all NGOs and their communication efforts. The current study on LGBTI asylum-focused NGOs demonstrates an alternative approach to online communication.

Also consistent with previous research, the current study uncovered a second function of community building (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters, 2007). By creating original tweets and posts, retweeting/reposting and linking to more external sites (rather than their own website), ORAM and IGLHRC created a community of news sources, activists, citizens and non-profits. Additionally, the current study found that the NGOs linked to more LGBTI-specific targeted websites, entities, and advocacy groups, thus creating a form of "queer social capital." Similar to the findings of Cronin and King (2014), the NGOs use of mediated messages through social networks help forge bonds of reciprocity and trust within the LGBTI community. This "queering" is achieved through the community function in order to foster feelings of bonding, communal support, and belonging. Aside from queer social capital, the current findings also build upon those of Nah (2009) who found Internet and social networking use created e-social capital in U.S. non-profit organizations. The findings also build on Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe (2007) who found a strong association between the use of Facebook and three types of social capital: bridging, bonding and maintained social capital. Thus, the implications of the current study are not just limited to the queer or LGBTI community, but are of value to social networking and new media scholarship at large.

The last discovered function, action, is also consistent with previous studies (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). This function is the most beneficial to NGO and the most visible (Hallahan, 2008). The organization's stakeholders and public are encouraged to engage in behavioral manifestations of the messages. Donations, volunteering, employment and advocating the organization's cause directly enhance the goals and mission of the NGOs. Also, simple engagement like clicking and sharing also disseminates awareness on the NGOs' cause. This finding is generalizable to not only NGOs in general, but also to niche-specific organizations (both for-profit and non-profit) who rely on strategic communication to motivate stakeholders and publics to partake in actions that help the organization achieve its objectives. The current study supplements previous literature from academics (Gudelunas, 2013; Rodriguez & Gilmore, 2015; Tindall & Waters, 2013), which serve as catalysts for LGBT research in public relations and strategic communication.

It's imperative to note the NGO's tweets/posts were more about North America., the Middle East, and Asia than other global regions. Not only does this show that the NGO is truly a global organization, but it also demonstrates that issues of LGBTI persecution and human rights are important concerns to citizens and organizations around the world. The public relations efforts of these NGOs made sure a consciousness of power hierarchies were not only known to stakeholders (Daymon & Demetrious, 2013), but also provided opportunities for stakeholders to address them. Social media enables activists to mobilize these global citizens and organizations by effectively transcending national and international boundaries at relatively little cost (Seo et al., 2009). Specifically, this study demonstrates that U.S. citizens are targeted for support, especially in monetary form. News and information about the oppression of LGBTIs from other global regions also allows for better understanding of the NGOs efforts in refugee/asylum seeker assistance.

Although the findings point to a global issue of LGBT inequality and human rights violations, it is important to note that most of the messages were about the United States, This finding highlights the fact that there are still discriminations in the U.S. as well. While the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in July of 2015, there continues to be backlash and subjugation of LGBT citizens. Some legislators have introduced and/or passed discriminatory religious freedom bills that allow businesses the legal right to deny services to LGBTIs. Out of the 78 religious freedom bills introduced in 2015, six became law and two were scaled back (Johnson, 2015). There has also been increased violence toward the transgender community. For example, 12 transgender women were murdered in 2014 and as of July 2015, ten transgender women were murdered in the U.S. (Kellaway, 2015). This of course does not include those murders of transgender women who were not reported, nor those victims who were misgendered. While this paper does not focus on the actual acts of inequalities in the United States or around the globe, it is still of worthy observation, particularly for future research.

One important observation during the analysis is that the two NGOs underutilize video/photos and corresponding video/photo social media platforms compared to other mainstream NGOs. There were no links to ORAM or IGLHRC's YouTube, Instagram or Flickr accounts, even though the NGO's websites indicated the NGO had accounts on all three social media plat-



forms. Photos and videos may aid in garnering affective responses from the organization's public and stakeholders. Videos have long been utilized to help mobile social movements online (Mattoni & Teune, 2014) and LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs may find utility in using them to help mobilize and inform publics. This finding coincides with other PR studies that have found nonprofits are not using social media to its full capability (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

While the current study employed a substantial amount of social networking messages, the sample was limited to only one year. There have been many vicissitudes in legislation and public opinion surrounding LGBTIs and equal rights since 2013. Future studies might incorporate a larger or more recent time-frame. There is also benefit in longitudinal studies that examine how social and legal climates have oscillated. How have LGBTI NGOs and nonprofits adapted to those fluctuations? The study was also limited to only two LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs in the United States and their use of only two social media platforms: Twitter and Facebook. Future research should focus on LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs in other global regions and multiple forms of social media platforms. There is also pragmatic utility in comparing and contrasting how various NGOs use both organizational communication and strategic communication to foster social change.

In terms of methodology and analysis, the current study utilized an inductive mixed-method approach to enhance an established typology and adapt it to a more niche organization. Future research would benefit from more inductive investigations of message content that generate more tailored and nuanced understanding of how that content affects cognitions, affect, and behavior in various publics and stakeholders. This study is limited in its capacity to create a generalizable typology that can be applied to all niche or minority populations. The current study does, however, provide a foundation for future research and offers important implications that add to public relations theory and the intersection of organizational communication and the LGBTI community.

## 6. Conclusion

Through a deductive/inductive analysis, this research has revealed how LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs are using social media to build and maintain organizational–public relationships. The study contributes to the overall research on LGBTI refugees, non-profit organizations, organizational communication and social media messages. Research provided here builds upon previous research in organizational communication and NGOs by supporting the use of social media messages as functions of information, community and action. The current study provides a more nuanced examination of those functions and establishes an affective classification within the information function to help foster social change by LGBTI asylum-specific NGOs. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the conventional public relations measures of cognitive learning, affective responses and resulting behaviors are manifested within these online functions as well. The current study also helps further the concept of queer social capital. The social media messages linked more to LGBTI-specific entities around the world than non-LGBTI organizations.

As technology continues to evolve and advance, so must the organization. The use of mediated messages, whether through traditional or social media, to further social change has long been a focus for advocacy groups world-wide. Online public relations research (such as the current study) not only furthers organizational communication theory, but also provides pragmatic examples that can be implemented in real-world situations. Social networking can help organizations better communicate their messages and invoke cognitive, affective, and behavioral changes in their stakeholders and publics.

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