

Perceptions of Empathy and Opinion Leadership in Organizational Communication

By

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Abstract

This graduate research project was undertaken with a number of objectives in mind: to define empathy in a communication context; to identify the relationship between opinion leadership and empathy in an organizational context; to identify the role of empathy in organizational communications; to develop a tool to assess perceived online opinion leadership; to develop a tool to measure perceived empathy in online communications; and, to test these tools in organizations to determine reliability and validity while gathering data to answer the proposed research questions. Through a partnership with three distinct organizations, a sequential mixed methods study design was selected involving 18 qualitative, in-depth interviews of organization members followed by a quantitative survey of a larger sample of organization members. Findings suggest that organizations may be considered empathetic if they make an effort to comprehend the experiences, thoughts and emotions, of their stakeholders while still meeting business goals; empathy in organizations has social, strategic and communicative functions, and it is perceived to positively impact opinion leadership of organizations.

Keywords: empathy; opinion leadership; empathetic organizations; organizational culture; organizational communication; two-step flow; grounded theory.

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Introduction

Increased technological capabilities and access to the Internet in recent decades have contributed to a communication revolution, an ongoing process changing the way we communicate and how we influence one another. The proliferation of participatory media sites has provided opportunities to utilize new media for unidirectional and symmetrical communication processes (Stansberry, 2012). Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are web-based services allowing individuals to construct and present a member profile, establish connections with other users, and view and traverse lists of connections made by other users (Moqbel, Nevo & Kock, 2013; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). These sites are a dominant feature in today's media landscape, and are increasingly incorporated into organizations' strategic communication plans (Men & Tsai, 2013). With the new communication channels available, audiences have become more fragmented than ever before (Wu, Hoffman, Mason & Watts, 2011). The question therefore arises as to the adequacy of existing models of information dissemination to describe patterns of communication in digital media (Stansberry, 2012). Furthermore, there is a broad need among organizations to understand what factors drive influence online, so that they can optimize these participatory channels of communication. This study contributes to the gap in knowledge by exploring the relationship between empathy and opinion leadership within an organizational context; it also seeks to further the understanding of how organizations demonstrate empathy in their communications.

Empathy in an online context refers to communications that allow for emotional exchanges, provide social support and help facilitate two-way communication (Preece, 1999). Organizational communications that are considered 'empathetic' may involve strategies such as perspective-taking and promoting a sense of 'togetherness' within a virtual community. It has been suggested that the decline of face-to-face communication associated with the Internet has made the study of interpersonal communication (thereby empathy) online redundant (Karlsen, 2015). However, I argue that the need to understand empathy is greater than ever, as there is the distinct possibility that it can transcend the physical world and be of key importance in online communications, especially if tied to influence. Past

literature has identified an indirect link between opinion leadership and empathy, as both are positively correlated with increased exposure to mass media (Lerner, 1958; Zhao et al., 2013).

This study represents the first known attempt to empirically study and relate opinion leadership and empathy, as well as the first attempt to build a tool to assess perceived online opinion leadership and empathy in organizational communications. Several scales for identifying opinion leaders exist, however none have been developed for online use and very few look at perceived leadership. Most require participants to self-identify as opinion leaders, whereas this project aims to identify organizations that are *perceived* to be leaders by their stakeholders. The research objective was to provide a number of recommendations relating to how organizations can strive to become -opinion leaders as well as develop and validate a reliable measure by which organizations can assess their online influence.

The two-step flow (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1964) and radial (Stansberry, 2012) models of communication lay the theoretical framework of this study. These models hold that publics receive mass media messages indirectly through opinion leaders or primary influencers. These individuals or groups function as information relay points; they receive, interpret and disseminate messages to their followers and maintain a certain degree of power over the messages themselves. Two-step flow, though first proposed decades ago, remains relevant when applied to SNSs. Online opinion leaders still filter and convey messages from mass media sources and engage in discussions which affect public opinion. If a number of people belong to the same online or virtual community, they may be influenced by the same group, organization, or individual.

Purpose of Research

This research project was undertaken with a number of objectives in mind: to define empathy in a communication context; to identify the relationship between opinion leadership and empathy in an organizational context; to identify the role of empathy in organizational communications; to develop a tool to assess perceived online opinion leadership; to develop a tool to measure perceived empathy in online communications; and, to test these tools in organizations to determine reliability and validity while gathering data to answer the proposed research questions. The study addressed the role of empathy in

online opinion leadership within an organizational context, with a particular focus on SNS communications. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was used, a type of design in which qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted, followed by a quantitative survey. Participants included organizations with active SNS profiles and their internal stakeholders (employees). Organization leaders were invited to participate in in-depth interviews, which explored the definition and role of empathy in organizational communications and informed the quantitative survey questions. An online survey was administered to employees of participant organizations to identify online opinion leader organizations, and to determine to what extent organizations that are perceived to be opinion leaders by their internal stakeholders are also perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders.

Literature Review

The Introduction and Evolution of Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue that Web 2.0 represents the evolutionary foundation for the development of social media as we know it today. The term, Web 2.0, was coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2004 to denote a series of technological innovations that “facilitate[d] inexpensive content creation, interaction, and interoperability” (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger, & Shapiro, 2012, p. 262). These innovations were marked by the collaborative and participatory use of the World Wide Web, and a shift in emphasis from institutions to users (Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010). Rather than accepting information disseminated to them hypodermically, these users looked to produce their own publicly accessible content, ushering in the age of User Generated Content (UGC) and democratization of the Internet (Berthon et al., 2012; Kaplan, & Haenlein, 2010). Further, networking technologies and the connectivity permitted by the rising popularity of mobile devices ensured more people would be spending more time online (Meikle, 2016). Many online platforms were conceived as community initiatives by those eager to share their ideas and creativity online (Van Dijck, 2013). These platforms thrived between 2000 and 2005, but as user bases grew exponentially from 2005 onward, these grassroots platforms were overwhelmed and increasingly absorbed into corporate “chains” of ownership (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 163). Following these takeovers, the “site’s corporate owners kept nurturing the image of collectivity and user centered operation, long after their strategies had transmogrified to the commercial realm” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 12). The networked public sphere was fundamentally different from the public realm occupied by traditional mass media in that it idealistically promoted community over commerce, or more realistically allowed for the co-existence of both (Van Dijck, 2013).

Social media are defined as widely accessible online tools that facilitate social interactions among individuals and/or entities (governments, organizations, etc.); in addition, they are thought of as “networked database platforms that combine public [and] personal communication” (Meikle, 2016, p. 6). The latter definition is much more literal: ‘networked’ indicates technological and social organization; ‘database’ and ‘platform’ denote business models; and, ‘personal and professional communication’ imply

an interest in culture (how publics use the platforms and why they do so) (Meikle, 2016). Social media vary in their purposes and approaches, but they share “an emphasis on enabling users to communicate, interact, edit, and share content in a social environment” (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012, p. 30). The term ‘social media’ was initially coined as a marketing tool, as a buzzword for describing and pitching the new web-based media and technology platforms. Eventually it evolved to describe the broader shifts in communication practices and user expectations that were associated with profile-based platforms and a more dynamic media environment (Meikle, 2016).

Social media can refer to either the platforms supporting the social or connective activities, or to content generated on them; further, they may exist in a variety of manifestations, including (but not limited to) blogs, social networking sites, user generated content sites, virtual worlds and online interactive games (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010). Bertot et al. (2010) argue that social media has four major strengths: collaboration, participation, empowerment, and time. Collaboration can occur regardless of geographic or temporal boundaries; social media platforms are often inexpensive and highly accessible so as to encourage participation; communities of users can be empowered to work toward a common goal; and, finally, communication is instantaneous, allowing efficiency on a scale never-before-seen. Different social media platforms can be understood as a vast number of microsystems, which altogether constitute a multifaceted and fluid ecosystem of connective media, where “[e]ach microsystem is sensitive to changes in other parts of the ecosystem” and adapts accordingly (technologically and socially) to remain relevant in terms of profitability and generating creativity and sociality (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 22).

General Impacts of Social Media on the Professional Communication Mediascape

Social media has been, and remains, a catalyst for significant changes in social rituals and behaviours. With respect to social media’s impact on communication professionals, it has been a key component in the establishment of a 24-hour news cycle, influencing how people receive, interpret and share information. Communication can now transcend temporal as well as physical boundaries - leading to the instantaneous propagation of information all over the world. This has significantly impacted the way publics interact with the platforms and one another, as well as their expectations of the accessibility

of others to communicate. Furthermore, the opportunity for symmetrical communication and organizational listening on or within a vast multitude of social media platforms allows organizational communicators to continually scan their environments to identify publics affected by potential organizational decisions or that want organizations to make certain decisions to solve problems that are important to them. Organizations must then communicate symmetrically with publics to cultivate high quality, long term relationships. Social media has simplified the audience feedback process, as users can communicate their approval of a message or content by clicking a ‘Like’ (or comparable) button, or by responding to content in a brief ‘comment’ (Van Dijck, 2013). This can save communicators from engaging in extensive polling or research of stakeholder needs and opinions.

Defining Empathy

Empathy is a phenomenon that has been approached in a wide range of academic disciplines, spanning psychology and philosophy, to biology, social work and healthcare (Altınbaş, Gülöksüz, Özçetinkaya & Oral, 2010). It is gaining traction in public discussion, particularly in the political, judicial and business spheres, with public figures such as Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg and American President Barack Obama championing its importance (Caplan, 2011). This breadth, however has contributed to widespread dissonance and disagreement over what behaviours or characteristics comprise empathy. This lack of consensual definition leads to inconsistencies in both the conceptualization and measurement of empathy (Fagiano, 2016; Elliot, Bohart, Watson, Greenberg & Hilsenroth, 2011; Gerdes, Segal & Lietz, 2010; Caplan, 2011).

Historically, empathy has been viewed as the involuntary arousal of feelings within us (Fagiano, 2016). Johann Gottfried Herder, in 1774, defined the ability to empathize as “our ability to understand sympathetically the similar – or radically different – experiences of others through the process of imaginatively feeling into the time, place, and history of a people” (Fagiano, 2016, p.35). Centuries later, Heinz Kohut (1959) similarly defined empathy as “vicarious introspection [or]... the capacity to [introspect] and feel oneself into the inner life of another person. It is our lifelong ability to experience what another person experiences, though, usually and appropriately, to an attenuated degree” (p.82). In

the 1980s and 1990s, a view of empathy emerged that saw an individual undergo the physiological experience of feeling what another is feeling, called motor mimicry, followed by the cognitive processing of these feelings, the ‘self-other awareness’ in the empathetic experience (Gerdes, Segal & Lietz, 2010). Levinson and Reuf (1992) identified three distinct qualities of empathy: knowing (cognitively) what a person is feeling; feeling (affect) what another is feeling; and responding compassionately. The response is the only measurable function, ruling out brain imaging and other scientific techniques (Gerdes et al., 2010). While Herder (1774) and Kohut (1959)’s definitions are similar in their emphasis on ‘feeling into’ the experiences of others, other, more recent definitions of have diverged to include the following: “Other-orientated feelings elicited by the perceived welfare for others” (Persson & Kajonius, 2016, p. 1); and, “[t]he capacity to know emotionally what another person is experiencing from within the frame of reference of that other person and the capacity to sample the feelings of another” (Altınbaş, Gülöksüz, Özçetinkaya & Oral, 2010, p.15).

In addition to a capacity, empathy may be understood as a response skill, or an interpersonal process of identity construction (Elliot et al., 2011). Still others view empathy as a situation-specific, cognitive-affective state (Gerdes et al., 2010). Investigations into sub-processes of empathy have uncovered connections to mirror neurons and three specific neuro-anatomical processes: emotional stimulation, conceptual perspective taking, and, emotion regulation (Elliot et al., 2011). It is a higher-order category under which different behaviors may be found, including empathetic rapport (adopting a compassionate attitude, demonstrating understanding), communicative attunement (staying attuned to the communications and experiences of others), and person empathy (demonstrating understanding of others’ experiences and motivations both presently and historically) (Elliot et al., 2011). The view of empathy as a skill is most appealing to quantitative scholarship as it is the most measurable conceptualization.

A Broad or Narrow Conceptualization?

In 2011, Amy Coplan called for a narrower conceptualization of empathy, contrary to other broad views advanced by other scholars (e.g. Frans De Waal, 2009; Altınbaş et al., 2010; and, Persson & Kajonius, 2016). She defines empathy as follows: “a complex, imaginative process through which an

observer simulates another person's situated psychological states while maintaining clear self-other differentiation" (p.40). She then isolates three processes commonly associated with empathy, however only calls one of these 'empathy proper.' Coplan argues that broad conceptualizations of empathy lead scholars to ignore or conflate differences among the processes, each of which are worthy of study in their own right (Caplan, 2011). The first sub-process discussed is emotional contagion, a primitive, empathetic process with distinct causes that set it apart from higher-order functions. A reflexive process triggered by sensory stimulation, it operates below the threshold of awareness and can be observed in many species thought incapable of self-awareness. It has its own neural architecture, phenomenology and effects, and manifests as the tendency to mimic and synchronize expressions, posture and vocalizations with another person automatically, without knowing the context of the emotion being transmitted (Coplan, 2011). Next, Coplan discusses pseudo-empathy, which she defines as:

[An] attempt to adopt a target individual's perspective by imagining how we ourselves would think, feel and desire if we were in the target individual's position...[it] is essentially a self-orientated perspective-taking...[using] our own selves and our responses to various simulated or imagined scenarios as a way to gain access to or understand another person's situated psychological states. (Coplan, 2011, p. 54)

Most situations are highly complex and one individual's response to a set of circumstances may not be a reliable indicator of what another's would be. This distinguishes pseudo-empathy from genuine empathy and it often results in errors in prediction, misattributions and personal distress (Caplan, 2011). Finally, Coplan defines genuine empathy, or empathy proper, as "a process through which an observer simulates another's situated psychological states, while maintaining clear self-other differentiation...the only [process] that can provide experiential understanding of another person" (Caplan, 2011, p.58). Other (rather than self-) orientated perspective taking requires increased mental flexibility, suppression of the self-perspective and emotional regulation (Caplan, 2011). Due to the effort and regulation involved in achieving genuine empathy – which is subject to biases and tied to familiarity and identification with the target individual - empathy seems to be a motivated and controlled top-down process (Caplan, 2011)

Several scholars, including Miller (2011) and Fagiano (2016), have critiqued the notion of a narrow conceptualization of empathy. Miller (2011) responded to Coplan's work, identifying three perceived shortcomings: (i) whether there was a need to distinguish these [three] processes as they had, in some form, been articulated by others; (ii) whether Coplan was correct in her methods for making the distinctions, as the paper laid a foundation for a conceptual discussion of empathy, but shifted to largely focus on providing neurological and evolutionary evidence for its claims; and, (iii) whether Coplan's distinctions themselves were correct, stating she did not go into sufficient depth in her discussion of empathy proper. Fagiano went further to suggest that the partitioning nature of Coplan's view could be damaging, as "distinctions of thought, are not only a narrowing of the empathy concept, but also a narrowing of empathetic experience" (Fagiano, 2016, p.34). This closed-system view implicitly selects and excludes certain relational experiences connected with constrained definitions of empathy (Fagiano, 2016). Fagiano (2016) then proceeds to call for a broad definition of empathy informed by multiple and pluralistic conceptualizations articulated throughout history and within academic disciplines. Empathy as a pluralistic phenomenon, he argues, must be understood within the different experiences and contexts in which it is used. For example, people have a capacity to demonstrate empathy in interpersonal relations, empathy for objects (fine art, music, etc.), and empathy for relations between things (responding empathetically to weather or other natural phenomena, etc.) (Fagiano, 2016). This conceptualization provides insight into the multidimensional and relational character of experience and is tied to moral sensibilities (Fagiano, 2016).

Empathy in SNS Communications

While empathy has been comprehensively studied in relation to interpersonal relations, there is significantly less literature on the role of empathy in online communications. Zhao, Abrahamson, Anderson, Ha and Widdows (2013) have posited that empathy, however, plays an increasingly significant role in online communities, where people actively seek out useful information and empathetic support. Lerner (1958) proactively claimed that empathy was indispensable during the transition from nonparticipant to participant mass media. He states: "high empathic capacity is the predominant personal

style only in a modern society, which is distinctly industrial, urban, literate and participant... In our time, indeed, the spread of empathy around the world is accelerating” (as cited in Boadu, 1981, p.198). Lerner also claimed that increased exposure to the media accelerated the development of individual empathic skill (Boadu, 1981, p.198). Thus, it may be possible that opinion leaders – based on their increased exposure to mass media – could demonstrate an increased capacity for empathy. Empathy, in turn, has been demonstrated to exert a positive influence on a community’s willingness to contribute personal knowledge and experience (Zhao et al., 2013).

Opinion Leadership: The Two-Step Flow Model

Katz (1957) defines the two-step flow of communication hypothesis as a process by which content stemming from mass media reach opinion leaders first, who then pass what information they learn or interpret to their peers. The hypothesis holds that people are more likely to be influenced by interpersonal interactions than by one-way communication from mass media. Persons classified as opinion leaders tend to be more engaged individuals within communities, with increased exposure to mass media compared to other community members. They can be found at almost every level of society, much like those they influence (Katz, 1957). Opinion leaders have also been found to be influential due to their possession of certain characteristics, including the personification of certain values, competence and strategic location (Katz, 1957, p. 73). Influencers and the influenced may change roles in different situations based on personal expertise (Katz, 1957). The two-step flow model stands apart from the transmission model in its belief that mass media exerts only an indirect influence over publics, by means of intermediary influential persons; both models adopt a top-down perspective of communication. Distortions to the message are also permitted, as these influential persons, or opinion leaders, interpret information presented by mass media and pass it along through discourse to peers and members of their communities. Thus, opinion leaders “who pay close attention to the mass media add their own thoughts and interpretations to messages before passing them on to their eventual end audiences” (Stansberry 2012, p. 16).

Critical Analysis of Two-Step Flow and its Critiques

In their publication “Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications”, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1964) state “that ideas, often, seem to flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population” (p. 32). These opinion leaders have greater influence over public opinion than mass media, particularly with respect to political processes (Lacy & Stamm, 2015). Messages thus gain influence when transmitted from a mass media source, to influential community members or groups (opinion leaders), and then on to the general public; the intermediaries in this process become not only important to publics, but to the originators of the mass media content as well. It is not that publics do not engage with mass media, rather, the media content does little to motivate consumers to act in a way that they had not intended to act. Lacy and Stamm (2015) propose that this should not be surprising and it reflects unrealistic expectations of media that exist in society. The publics may consume mass media, however they “ma[k]e sense of media content through interpersonal connections” (Lacy and Stamm, 2015, p.118). Liu (2007) suggests that interpersonal influence dominates mass media content and its interpretation because masses do not trust the media as much as opinion leaders, and that people prefer to talk to like-minded peers with “a similar partisan orientation” (p. 236). In addition, when newsworthy events occur, people prefer to discuss the event with those they feel have related expertise (Liu, 2007). The influence of opinion leaders can only spread through a network should those they influence spread their views amongst their own connections (Liu, 2007). While publics may not view mass media as trustworthy, the feeling may be mutual as uses and gratifications theory suggests that individuals tend to “selectively perceive information from the news media to satisfy their needs” (Liu, 2007, p. 118).

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1964) describe opinion leadership as a fundamental part of community relationships, and argue that leader influence is tied to a specific group, or sphere of influence. These persons are more interested and more highly exposed to media content, and they often have more social contacts than non-leaders (Liu, 2007). They are esteemed by their communities for upholding certain values, competencies and strategic social location (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Often viewed as trendsetters,

opinion leaders are typically early adopters of innovation, products and services. For example, politicians, CEOs of major companies and esteemed journalists or researchers may wield significant influence among their communities of followers. Opinion leaders may also include influential individuals with a much smaller sphere of influence, such as a well-connected local businessman or a regional non-profit. These individuals or groups are then able to relate their experiences (positive or negative) to those in their environments (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). This interest in current information helps to facilitate their consumption of mass media content. Opinion leaders' influence tends to be topic specific, meaning their level of influence is transient, depending on their level of expertise on given subjects. Their primary role is to provide context on the media content at hand for the general public (Stansberry, 2012). In the words of Uzunoglu and Kip (2014), opinion leaders serve "as the connective communication tissue that alert their peers to what matters among political events, social issues, and consumer choices" (p. 593).

The proposal of two-step flow was ground breaking in the field of communications, and it has been deemed part of a "basic paradigm for research into the roles of mass communication in political processes" (Lacy & Stamm, 2015, p. 106). It places emphasis on the role of influential people as intermediary variables capable of communicating – or blockading – mass media content (Karlsen, 2015). In addition, the work of Katz and Lazarsfeld demonstrates that opinion leaders can exist in every social stratum, and are not limited to an educated social elite (Karlsen, 2015).

Over the decades since two-step flow was first proposed, many scholars have challenged the model. It has been criticized firstly, for being too simplistic a description for information dissemination. Stansberry (2012) and Karlsen (2015) write that communication moves, not from media to opinion leader and from opinion leader to citizens, but rather information can travel in many different directions with different patterns of flow. Others believe the model is too similar to a marketing phenomenon, failing to advance communication as a serious scholarly field (Lacy & Stamm, 2015). Furthermore, Liu (2007) has criticized the model for not describing the extent to which opinion leaders are able to influence others (p. 242). Liu suggests that the model, as proposed by Katz and Lazarsfeld, falls short on a number of fronts: it fails to acknowledge that opinion leaders can be influenced by other opinion leaders; it questionably

assumes that people are willing to trust all opinion leaders, and distrust all mass media; it neglects that some opinion leaders can be passive information receivers; and, it fails to clearly distinguish opinion leaders from ordinary citizens (Liu, 2007, p. 240, 241). Many theorists hold, however, that despite its critiques, the two-step flow model is correct in its assumption that “certain people can be considered [opinion leaders] and are likely to pass on information and influence more passive individuals” (Karlsen 2015, p. 304).

Taking Two-Step Flow Online

When Katz and Lazarsfeld were developing two-step flow as a plausible means to explain communication dissemination, the most advanced technologies were radio and telephone. In today’s world, there is an “array of web-based media” including blogs, online communities, and social networking sites (Wu, Hofman, Mason & Watts, 2011, p. 705). These technologies have not only served to fragment a once-collective audience, they allow consumers to select the content they are exposed to and generate content themselves, which can be presented to massive audiences (Wu et al., 2011). Communication platforms such as Twitter represent a spectrum of communications, from traditional mass media, to mass personal, to interpersonal (Wu et al., 2011). Unlike traditional media, online communication flow can be traced, monitored and studied; changes in behaviour and attitudes, however, remain difficult to assess.

When applying the two-step flow model, we are faced with a number of assumptions. Firstly, it is a relatively new concept that physical proximity – or even a real relationship – is not strictly necessary for opinion leadership to take place. As Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) state, “with the current technological developments, face-to-face communication is no longer the sole determinant of the personal interaction; instead online communities [are] inextricably connected through the Internet” (p. 593). Thus, distance and time cease to matter as constraints on an opinion leader’s influence. As long as a number of people belong to an online or virtual community, they may be influenced by the same individual. Increasingly, popular online bloggers and micro-bloggers are considered to be opinion leaders as they demonstrate characteristics of such individuals as described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). In

addition, a minority of online influencers are responsible for a majority of information collection and distribution, rather than mass media being the central source of information (Stansberry, 2012). For example, a 2011 study found that twenty thousand accounts operated by celebrities, organizations, bloggers and other prominent individuals (0.05% of total users) were found to attract nearly 50% of all attention on Twitter, and that mass media communications constituted merely 15% of correspondence on the website (Bastos, Raimundo & Travitzki, 2013; Wu et al., 2011).

These influential individuals are incredibly important to online information communication flows, and rather than engaging in face-to-face discourse with peers, they “distribute contextualized content through a wide network of links” (Stansberry 2012, p. 121). They retain defining characteristics of opinion leaders (p. 16-17), including interest and openness to mass media content and perceived expertise; this is apparent through increased online engagement (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

Online communication platforms facilitate public access to opinion leaders and draw together large social communities centred around shared interests. The role of influencers online is two-fold. Their first role is to be information conduits. Primary influencers collect information from a wide range of sources across the web, organize and collate it, and distribute that information to the community. Because primary influencers are also densely linked to websites outside of the community, they appear to play a prominent role in distributing information developed within the interest-based network to outside websites and users. The second role primary influencers play is one of shared culture creation. In the process of collecting, collating, and redistributing information to the interest-based community, primary influencers contextualize content to adhere to communities’ shared culture. In doing so, primary influencers lead the meaning-making process within interest-based communities (Stansberry, 2012). This seems to be a natural evolution from their historic role of opinion leaders, as put forward in the mid-twentieth century. Opinion leaders today still filter and convey messages from mass media sources and engage in discussions which affect public opinion. As in Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) conception, opinion leaders continue to function as nodes connecting the mass media and the interpersonal networks (Karlsen 2015). With the introduction and growth of virtual communities, the potential spheres of

influence opinion leaders can inhabit have expanded exponentially. Further, online opinion leaders have taken on gatekeeping functions, as they are operating using communication media where there is so much mass media content, they cannot possibly disseminate it all to their followers. Because it is possible to quantify reach, engagement and other metrics within SNSs, influential persons or entities (including online opinion leaders) have been termed influencers.

Some have criticized that new online technologies are isolating and inhibit interpersonal communication, while others argue that it connects people to a greater extent than ever before (Karlsen, 2015). Websites and social networking sites are increasingly conversational environments, which further supports the notion that people are influenced through interpersonal communication (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). The influence of these opinion leaders in this brave new digital world stretches far beyond what Katz and Lazarsfeld could have imagined.

As discussed, online influencers have been likened to gatekeepers of content on social networking sites. In the digital world, “gatekeeping occurs through a process in which a multitude of users pass information forward,” a major departure from the traditional and highly-controlled mass communication process (Bastos et al, 2013, p. 262). A study conducted by Bastos et al. (2013) found that the influence of small minorities was capable of generating frequently replicated tweets that contributed to a trending topic in a meaningful way. Also, Twitter users with high engagement in two-way communication were found to have strong selective influence on information that passed through their networks.

Online Applications of the Two-Step Flow Model

Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) explored the function of bloggers and micro-bloggers as online opinion leaders, particularly in relation to brand communication. They suggest that bloggers and online influencers have the power to change public perceptions of organizations through relating positive and negative brand experiences to their audiences. Positive reviews, for instance, can motivate people to search for, purchase and use certain products (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Organizations are beginning to tap into this influence by sponsoring blogs, or developing relationships with certain bloggers in order to “generate interest, drive action, create goodwill, establish expertise, and create dialogue with their online

stakeholders” (p. 594). This approach is preferable to traditional mass media, as it is considered by audiences to be more trustworthy (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

Researchers have also explored the potential for online opinion leaders to engage in ‘word of mouth’ marketing, a process by which a communicator takes on the role of trusted community member and performs services for a company or marketers (Kozinets, De Valk, Wojnicki & Wilner, 2010). The “hype-to-honey” theory demonstrates that communal word of mouth does not simply increase or amplify marketing messages; rather, marketing messages and meanings are systematically altered in the process of embedding them. The theory has implications for commerce and politics, particularly with respect to how marketing campaigns should be constructed to target and benefit from word of mouth (Kozinets et al. 2010, p. 72). As opinion leaders are often viewed by publics as information savvy, publics are often willing to adopt products being promoted (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014).

Vaccari and Valeriani (2015) investigated two distinct ways political communication can occur using Twitter, the first being through direct communication to followers and the second being through indirect communication, depending on followers reposting messages to their own networks. The use of indirect communication allows candidates to reach a secondary and potentially more diverse audience, and it is likened to a revised two-step flow theory of communication (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). Twitter is an arena in which “various types of personal influence and opinion leadership develop,” and influence is not evenly distributed on social media (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015, p. 1028). Their findings revealed that small minorities following political candidates produced the vast majority of tweets and gathered more followers; these minorities included celebrities and highly visible individuals and organizations. Thus, it is the engagement of followers, rather than the number of followers, that corresponds with electoral support. Targeting a ‘vital middle’ between the silent, unengaged masses and minority of elite users may be the best approach for political campaigns on Twitter.

Suggested Revisions and Theory Evolution

Given the changes that have taken place since the two-step flow model was postulated, it would make sense that the model would need to undergo a series of revisions to conform with today’s media

environment. Firstly, it has been suggested that all geographical constraints on the communities within an opinion leader's sphere of influence be omitted. The world today is ever-shrinking and shared interests are far more unifying in the online world than regional identity (Uzunoglu & Kip, 2014). Secondly, the top-down information dissemination system is too simple for the vast size of the online networks.

Uzunoglu and Kip (2014) argue that there can be tiers of opinion leaders influencing opinion leaders, forming a multistep flow of communication with the same fundamental principles as two-step flow theory. Information flows in several directions, from a variety of sources, and moves fluidly into and out of a community (Stansberry, 2012).

communication flow through digital influencers model. Adapted from Uzunoglu and Kip (2014).

This multi-step approach has been gaining momentum in academia, however this has not dissuaded public relations practitioners and marketers from seeing the value of opinion leaders and seeking them out to help mediate relationships between organizations and audiences (Stansberry, 2012). This further emphasizes individual influence as outweighing traditional mass media approaches.

In addition to the multi-step flow model, an alternate model has been proposed, also derived from Katz and Lazarsfeld's two-step flow model. The radial model of communication positions community influencers at the center of the interest network (rather than mass media), surrounded by and highly connected to hubs of online communication activity. These hubs include "non-profit and corporate organizational websites, personal blogs and websites, traditional news publication sites, and primary source research reports such as published surveys and case studies" (Stansberry, 2012, p. 124).

The disregard for mass media in this model altogether is also telling of the regard society has for traditional mass media, and seems to reinforce the work of Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl and Pingreen (2015), which suggested that public distrust of mass media has been steadily increasing in recent decades.

Summary

The two-step flow of communication hypothesis (Katz, 1957) is a process by which messages stemming from mass media reach opinion leaders first, who then pass what information they learn or interpret to their peers. The hypothesis holds that people are more likely to be influenced by interpersonal

interactions than by one-way communication from mass media. This model stands apart from other models – the transmission, mathematical and encoding-decoding models of communication (Lasswell, 1948; Weaver, 1949; Hall, 1980) – due to its emphasis on the role of influential individuals on how publics interpret and understand messages. To apply the model online, a number of assumptions must be made. Most important is the relatively new concept that physical proximity is not a prerequisite for opinion leadership to develop. As long as a number of people belong to an online or virtual community, they may be influenced by the same individual. Websites and social networking sites are increasingly conversational environments, which further supports the notion that people are influenced through interpersonal communication. The radial model of communication positions community influencers at the centre of the interest network (rather than mass media), surrounded by and highly connected to hubs of online communication activity. These influencer hubs include “non-profit and corporate organizational websites, personal blogs and websites, traditional news publication sites, and primary source research reports such as published surveys and case studies” (Stansberry 2012, p. 124).

Persons, or entities, classified as opinion leaders tend to be more engaged individuals, with more exposure to mass media, and can be found at almost every level of society. Opinion leaders have also been found to be influential due to their possession of certain characteristics, including the personification of certain values, competence and strategic location. This can include organizations, which oftentimes have increased exposure to mass media through communication and marketing departments, and adhere to certain values and mission statements. The literature demonstrates that empathy plays an increasingly significant role in online communities, where members often seek out emotional support and validation. Further, scholars (e.g., Learner, 1958) have argued that empathy is indispensable during the transition from nonparticipant to participant mass media and that increased exposure to the media accelerates the development of individual empathic skill.

Research Questions

This study advanced three central research questions, each corresponding to a phase of the research methodology (Table 1). The first question “How is empathy defined in a professional communication context?” was addressed through a survey of academic literature in a variety of disciplines focusing on empathy, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with participant organization leaders and subject matter experts. The second research question “What is the role of empathy in organizational communications?” was also addressed in the qualitative interviews phase.

The third research question “To what extent are organizations that are perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders also perceived to be opinion leaders by their internal stakeholders?” was explored in the quantitative phase of this study. In addition, this study put forward a fourth, mixed method research question, asking “How do themes gathered from the qualitative interviews help to explain the potential relationship between empathy and opinion leadership in an organizational context?”

Methodology

A mixed methods study design was selected for this project, as the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provides a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Specifically, an explanatory sequential mixed methods design was chosen, comprising a three-phase project involving the collection and analysis of qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey. The quantitative results served to situate and explain the qualitative findings in greater detail. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the procedure. The notations within Figure 1, QUAL and quan, indicate that greater emphasis was attached to the qualitative findings in the analysis of data.

Three organizations with active SNS profiles were invited to participate in the study. Criteria for organization selection included a staff of over twenty employees, and a minimum of five hundred friends/followers on the organization's most-used SNS profile. Participant organizations representative of various sectors were sought out, including for-profit, non-profit, and government. Each participating organization was based in New Brunswick, Canada to mitigate any significant geographic or cultural variables. Organization A was a for-profit, media production company with a B-corporation status and approximately 20 full-time employees. Organization B was a non-profit utility service provider owned by the municipality, with approximately 95 full-time employees and 36,500 clients. Organization C was a member and volunteer-based charity with approximately 200 full-time employees. For each participant organization, members of the leadership team were invited to participate in in-depth interviews and internal stakeholders (employees) of the selected organizations were invited to complete an online quantitative survey. All participants interviewed or surveyed as part of this study were over the legal age of majority (18 in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick).

Use of Grounded Theory Approach in Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Grounded theory refers to the construction of a theory through the analysis of data; thus, the theory is grounded in the data. This method of qualitative inquiry does not begin with a predetermined conceptual framework, rather, the research is guided by an openness to emerging concepts and theories. Grounded theory was established as a methodology by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in

a series of publications spanning the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define theory as, “a set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena” (p. 15). Grounded theory advocates argue this exploratory and inductive type of theory development is more likely to resemble reality than a series of concepts based on experience or speculation only; it is more likely to offer insight, enhance understanding and provide a meaningful guide to action than deductive lines of inquiry.

Studies using grounded theory involve multiple stages of data collection and analysis. To investigate a process, interaction or phenomenon, researchers explore the views or experiences of individuals with the phenomenon. Qualitative data is collected from these individuals, most commonly through interviews. The raw data is analyzed through coding – a systematic and creative process that identifies, develops and relates concepts in the data that become the building blocks of theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As an exploratory method, grounded theory was well suited to this study, as empathy in organizational communication has received little attention in the past.

Data collection began with 18 in-depth interviews over 9 days with participant organization leaders. These were conducted by telephone or in-person at a mutually agreed upon time and location between March 15 and March 24, 2017. Upon meeting in-person, I reviewed an informed consent procedure with each participant. If an interview was conducted by telephone, I reviewed the informed consent document with the participant and ensured verbal consent was received before proceeding with the interview. All interviews were audio recorded, provided each participant agreed to audiotaping. An interview protocol was used to guide interviewees through a set of generally open-ended questions designed to elicit insights into the definition and role of empathy in communication, informing RQ1 and RQ2; these were semi-structured encounters allowing for questions and probes.

Once the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed and identifying information (name, age, position title) was stripped from the transcripts. Participants were assigned a number, and their place of employment was recorded on the transcripts for comparative purposes. The transcripts were analysed using a grounded theory approach, whereby coding of the data took place in

several stages. The number of participants interviewed was informed by the point of theoretical saturation, the point at which additional data collection opportunities yielded no new information (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this investigation, saturation was reached at the 15th interview, and the final three interviews provided no unique information; they provided additional evidence to support theoretical insights already identified.

As the project progressed, the type of coding used moved from a microanalysis (detailed, line-by-line analysis) to a macroanalysis (integrating major categories and forming a larger theoretical scheme). Open coding was the first to be applied to the raw data. It allowed for the generation of categories, identification of their properties, and exploration of the extent to which those categories varied. Axial coding was then undertaken to relate the categories and their subcategories, linking them together at the level of properties and dimensions. Strauss and Corbin (1998) write that these initial hunches or relationships are called “hypotheses because they link two or more concepts, explaining the what, where and how of a phenomenon” (p. 135). Finally, categories were compared to other categories in order to build a theory; an overarching or core category was identified as the central theme of the research, with the ability to logically pull the other categories together, forming a consistent explanation of the whole, and accounting for the variation within those categories. Once the core category emerged, I engaged in selective coding, which actively compared the raw data to the core category in a more precise manner than when the categories were first identified. The results of the multi-step coding procedure and the emergent theory are presented in the results section.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Following the collection of qualitative data, the second stage of the project involved a survey comprising two scales intended to measure whether an organization was perceived as an opinion leader by its internal stakeholders, and whether it was perceived to be empathetic by its internal stakeholders. Each of these scales was adapted from predetermined and previously validated measurement tools, available as open-access publications, though heavily modified for the purpose of this study. The opinion leadership scale was adapted from Childers (1986) and repurposed to measure the perceived online

opinion leadership of organizations. The empathy scale was adapted from Tsai et al. (2013) and repurposed to measure the perceived empathy of organizational communications. Past literature (Lerner, 1958) identified an indirect link between opinion leadership and empathy, through increased exposure to media. This phase of the study served to test a direct relationship between these two variables, addressing RQ3. A survey was the preferred means of data collection in this case as it allowed the sampling of a large population (approximately 300) and is often associated with a rapid turnaround. An online survey was ideal for this study because it allowed data from employees of multiple organizations to be collected at a single site; it also presented data in a format easily prepared for statistical analysis. This survey was cross-sectional in that it sampled members of a population at one time only.

The survey development software LimeSurvey was used to host the quantitative survey, chosen because the collected data was stored exclusively on servers belonging to Mount Saint Vincent University, where the analysis took place. Each of the participant organizations was provided a codename (Organization A, B, etc.), communicated to all employees of that organization such that they could identify their place of work when completing the survey. The internal stakeholders of the participant organizations were invited to participate by an email sent by the relevant participant organization on March 22, 2017. The invitations included a hyperlink leading to the online survey. Prior to gaining access to the questionnaire, participants were required to read and agree to an informed consent procedure. Twenty nine respondents completed a survey comprised of 47 questions, including the two scales, additional questions developed following analysis of the qualitative interviews, a number of demographic questions, and open response questions; it required an estimated 15-20 minutes to complete. Survey participants were anonymized and individual data was not released to the participant organizations.

The quantitative data was exported from LimeSurvey and then analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS statistical software. The proportion and demographic characteristics of the population responding to the survey was reported, including place of work, gender, age, organization role, and duration of employment. With the understanding that a low survey response rate limited the generalizability of the findings, the validity of the new scales for perceived online opinion leadership and

perceived online empathy was determined using confirmatory factor analysis, and internal consistency was located by calculating the Cronbach's Alpha value for each scale. Descriptive statistics were outlined and explained for the overall scales, each scale item, and the additional questions resulting from the interviews. Significant correlations were then calculated and presented, and finally the open response survey items were presented and discussed.

Qualitative Results and Interpretation

Participant Profile

Between March 15, 2017 and March 24, 2017, 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with members of three organizations, in line with the procedure outlined and in accordance with University Research Ethics Board policies. Twelve of the interviews were conducted with members of Organization A, a media production company, and included both members of the organization's executive and non-management employees. Four of the interviews were conducted with members of Organization B, an energy and utility service provider, and only included members of upper management. Two of the interviews were conducted with members of Organization C, a member and volunteer-based charity, and only involved members of the leadership team. An equal number of men and women participated, and participants ranged in age from mid-twenties to late sixties.

Initial Interview Impressions

During each in the 18 in-depth interviews conducted in the first phase of this study, I composed memos detailing initial impressions. These were intended to inform later analysis of the interview transcripts. These memos were merged into a single document following the final interview on March 24. The contents of this document are presented below:

Summary.

From March 15, 2017 to March 24, 2017, I conducted 18 interviews with participant organization members. Individuals in leadership and non-leadership positions were interviewed, giving a comprehensive overview of the organizations, and the varying perspectives within it. Overall, the interviews were highly positive and employees demonstrated satisfaction with the organizations, their cultures and practices.

All participants indicated that they had regular communication with their respective organizations. Organization A members cited face-to-face meetings, email and texting as the three primary methods of communication, in addition to SNS-based communication. These were deemed effective by many staff

members. Some participants commented that Organization A is heavily dependent on face-to-face interactions, and that this is largely possible due to the organization's size. Organization B participants emphasized the use of different social media channels to serve different purposes. Organization C participants highlighted the importance of newsletters and storytelling for communicating with both internal and external stakeholders via SNS and traditional media channels. Some issues were identified relating to barriers between organization management and technicians, and the notion that sometimes the impact of an individual's brand can outshine the organization's brand.

Empathy and its role in communication.

The majority of participants defined the term empathy using strikingly similar language, including: understanding other perspectives, relating to others, placing yourself in another's position, respecting others, listening, taking others' feelings into account, and being kind and/or supportive. The value of establishing balance, and understanding needs and perspectives were highlighted in a number of interviews. This shared understanding is important because it shows all interviewees were describing the same concept.

Many believed empathy has an important role in communication; however, understandings of this role differed among participants. Some held the belief that empathy helps to open lines of communication and that, without it, people struggle to communicate. This open communication was seen to foster positive environments. Others held the belief that the role of empathy in communication changes based on the people involved in the process of communicating.

One theme that emerged was a potential role of empathy in lowering tensions in the workplace, i.e. the ability of empathy to "grease the wheels" when things go wrong in organizations. It was suggested that empathy can facilitate opportunities for the organization, such as improving management-worker and organization-client relationships.

The empathetic organization.

A majority of interviewees place constraints on empathy in the workplace that differ from personal empathy. Empathy was described by these individuals as providing everyone the opportunity to bring

thoughts into open areas of discussion and collaborating, while still being productive. Organizational empathy was also associated with credibility, accountability, authenticity, reliability, critical thinking, kindness and respect by several participants. However, other participants held the belief that because organizations are run by people, there shouldn't be a difference between personal and organizational empathy.

Some examples of empathetic practices in day-to-day organizational life include considering jargon when talking to clients, the ability to give/receive feedback through open and honest communication. Participants stressed the complexity and wide range of factors that affect organizations, stating that even when considering an empathetic organization, empathy is only a part of the whole.

Balancing expectations was mentioned by one interviewee as essential to empathetic organizations, stating that while employees may expect their ideal organization to work for them, they should be prepared to put in as much work. This means that organizations need to determine how much energy they expend on empathy based on how much they can expect from their employees. Balance and boundaries seem to be key to bringing empathy into the workplace.

Many participants agreed that at the end of the day, organizations are comprised of people, and that whether an organization is empathetic or not is dependent on the capacity of its people to determine. There was some indecisiveness over whether empathy can be a top-down or bottom-up initiative in organizations generally. However, it was suggested that there presently is a top-down culture of empathy already established in organizations A and C. Challenges associated with becoming an empathetic organization include: the notion that everyone in the organization is being called upon to be empathetic; that some individuals take advantage of overly empathetic organizations; that the trendiness of positive work environments make it hard to find truly empathetic or value-orientated organizations; that a commitment to empathy can sometimes be taken as permission to be less productive. Triple bottom line philosophies, B-Corporations, and circular/sustainable business models were provided as manifestations of empathetic organizational structures by participants. Further, some companies including Pixar Animation Studios, Patagonia, Etsy, Ben and Jerry's and Hemmings House were provided as examples of

empathetic organizations, when participants were asked to name companies they perceived to be highly, or appropriately empathetic.

Opinion Leadership (OL).

Many participants acknowledged that their organizations are striving to be an OL, and that they would like to be an OL. Some participants suggested that Organization A products may not cause social change directly, but that many are indirectly related to social change. Getting there, one participant suggested, would require the organization only taking on work it is passionate about.

One participant stated that Organization A operates within circles of influence, and that prioritizing its impact on its immediate community is most important. One participant suggested that by being empathetic, organizations become more attractive which makes them more impactful and more influential.

There is a sense among interviewees that their organizations have identified values and that leadership is steering the participant organizations toward specific goals. Some participants made the distinction between the organization's OL and that of the organization's leader, explaining that in comparison to the leader's brand, the company's felt less impactful and less defined. However, there was acknowledgement that the leader's OL reflected positively on the company and its brand. Further analysis will likely yield more findings and refine the impressions provided in the list above.

Interview Themes: Defining Empathy

Qualitative interview findings are presented below. Central themes emerging from the grounded theory analysis are presented in three sections, each with findings corresponding to a section of interview questions: Section 1: Defining Empathy; Section 2: Opinion Leadership; and, Section 3: The Empathetic Organization. In Section 1, four emergent themes were identified: Comprehension of Others' Experiences; Socio-Cultural Aspects of Empathy; Strategic Aspects of Empathy; and, Communicative Role. Each of these comprises a number of focussed subthemes, which will be discussed in a later section. Excerpts from interviews are provided as evidence to support emergent insights. These quotations were not edited for grammar, choice of words or sentence structure, except to remove any identifying

information. Each participant was assigned a 2-digit alphanumeric code based on their organization (either A, B, or C) and the order in which they were interviewed (1-12). Thus, the third participant interviewed from Organization B received the code B3.

Comprehension of other's experience.

There was agreement among many participants when asked to define empathy based on their experiences. Firstly, empathy was described as active perspective-taking (seeing another's point of view), allowing a comprehensive understanding of other's experiences, challenges and goals to be achieved (A2, A8, B2).

If you want to really connect with people, it's about understanding their perspective...there's value in understanding someone else's point of view. And I don't have to adopt that, but there's value in understanding that... and then thinking about probably what is really called empathy, about the ability to understand somebody else's perspective. (A2)

Understand[ing] the people that you're speaking to and what they experience and the challenges they experience, the goals they are trying to achieve. (A8)

I guess empathy is just considering other people's feelings in your, that's kind of what I think of. And being, kind of, putting yourself in their situation and understanding what their concerns may be. (B2)

Empathy moves beyond simple perception of these experiences, into interpretation, indicating there is a level of cognition involved and that empathy is a higher order ability (A9, A12, A1). It was suggested that empathy is the critical ability to comprehensively understand someone's point of view (C1, A2, A4).

It's trying to put myself in the shoes of the person I'm talking about or that I'm with. It's also critical thinking, being empathetic isn't just hearing something and going oh, that sucks. I think it's more like trying to put yourself in their position and trying to understand what they're feeling. (A9)

I think empathy involves listening to people and understanding where they're coming from, understanding their concerns, understanding their issues, and just listening. I think listening is an important part of empathy, and then just how you respond to what they're telling you. (C1)

Empathy is our ability to, as much as we possibly can, understand the position someone else is at... So for me, empathy is that critical ability to be able to understand similarities between two parties and to really feel the emotions of the other person or that party. (A4)

Participant A2 noted that while empathy involves exploring alien perspectives, people are able to achieve that understanding while holding true to their own perspectives, without capitulating. Further, participant A4 suggested empathy was not limited to the perception of one type of emotion; rather, it could be applied equally across the emotional spectrum. Empathy was described as being largely dependent on listening and openness to new ideas and perspectives (C1, C2, A9).

There's value in understanding someone else's point of view. And I don't have to adopt that, but there's value in understanding that... even if you do disagree with them, you are opening the conversation floor up to bigger possibilities. And you're not, just because you're taking a rock-solid stance on something doesn't mean you're not open to what they're saying at all. (A2)

It doesn't necessarily have to be understanding the challenges but also the wins. (A4)

I think listening is an important part of empathy, and then just how you respond to what they're telling you. (C1)

I think being able to under – to listen – understand somebody's position and what it is that they're going through. (C2)

So I guess empathy for me is being able to listen to someone and feel for them and try and put myself in their position. (A9)

One particularly interesting finding was the high frequency with which participants relied on the use of metaphors to describe empathy. These included variations of the phrases “putting yourself in someone else’s shoes,” and “seeing the world through someone else’s eyes” (A1, A9, B1). Both suggest a highly immersive and imaginative experience. Another common comparison was the likening of empathy to a bridge, facilitating understanding, reducing differences, and exposing similarities between parties; the connection is successfully made when understanding is achieved (A4, A2).

I know you're going through something and you put yourself in their shoes and try to get to, try to understand. (A1)

It's trying to put myself in the shoes of the person I'm talking about or that I'm with. (A9)

So we are not to seeing it from a corporation or business perspective, we are seeing it through our customer's eyes. (B1)

To build an empathetic bridge, which is what we do, we want to tell stories about people that other people who don't understand or know these people now understand and realize that they're actually very similar. (A4)

Various conceptualizations of empathy arose throughout the interviews. It was described as an ability most commonly (A4, A8, A9, A11), as a personality trait (A6), a by-product of intelligence (A2) and as a business tool (B1). This variety suggests some ambiguity about whether participants feel that empathy is inherent or learned; belief that empathy is foremost a personality trait, or due to intellect suggests that people are born with a certain capacity for empathy, whereas an ability or tool can often be acquired and improved on.

Empathy as an ability is inherently limited in the sense that people can only understand another’s point of view to the best of their individual ability (A4); thus, empathizing is an active attempt to understand what others are going through (B3).

Empathy is our ability to, as much as we possibly can, understand the position someone else is at.

(A4)

You feel for them to try and understand what they're going through, you try to do that. (B3)

The notion of self-orientated empathy, or relating to others based on one's own experiences, was evident among two participants. In fact, one participant described his inner monologue during a recent social interaction, in which the narrative progressed from a sole focus on self-point of view, to self-orientated perspective taking (A9).

I would define empathy as being able to experience or, based on your own experience, try to understand what an individual is going through. So, it's... you can only really take on as much of someone's experience based on your own experience (A1)

I would say being empathetic is trying to put yourself in a position, and relate to what they're going through (A5).

You know for example last night or at 6 AM the doorbell rang, and I live in the South End which is a sketchy neighborhood, you know, my dog barked and it was disturbing. So I looked at the window and said hello, and this dude was there and he was like, 'do you want me to shovel your steps?' So I said, no thank you, and he said bye. And so I just didn't understand, who was this guy and my first thoughts were maybe he wanted me to open the door, to break in if he needs money or if he's lost or under the influence of something. But then I started thinking, maybe this guy just thinks that 6 o'clock is when people get up, when they're getting ready for work. And I don't know, I started putting myself in this guy's position and asking if I were him and why would I be doing this? (A9)

Self-orientated perspective taking is consistent with earlier descriptions of empathy, such as “putting yourself in someone else's shoes.” Though there are limitations to achieving true understanding of another's experiences – due to the inability to fully separate from the self – several participants indicated that the effort to try and understand is meaningful and doesn't delegitimize empathy (A12, B1).

I think it's a matter of not necessarily understanding how someone's feeling but being willing to communicate with them to try and understand. (A12)

So the way I see empathy, which is sort of trying to see it from someone else's perspective. (B1)

One participant suggested that exploration of another's experiences should be undertaken free of personal bias (A1). This may be hindered by the inability of the individual to fully separate the self from the empathetic experience.

Try[ing] to understand and not judge what they're experiencing. (A1)

An emergent theme from the interviews was that empathy, as a form of active immersion into the thoughts and feelings of others (B3), has both rational and emotional components (A8). This duality adds another layer of complexity to the definition being constructed, and requires individuals to process others' experiences on both a cognitive and emotional level (B2, A9).

I guess it's feeling. Feeling and thoughts of someone else, what they're thinking. (B3)

I think empathy is the ability to place yourself into someone else's situation and understand a situation from their perspective or feelings from their perspective. (A8)

I guess empathy is just considering other people's feelings. (B2)

It's also critical thinking, being empathetic isn't just hearing something and going oh, that sucks. I think it's more like trying to put yourself in their position and trying to understand what they're feeling...So I guess empathy for me is being able to listen to someone and feel for them and try and put myself in their position. (A9)

One participant related that there is a physical aspect to empathy, a physiological response (A1).

But empathy is very physical too. It's almost like taking on those emotions. (A1)

Socio-cultural aspects of empathy.

Several socio-cultural aspects of empathy were identified by participants. Firstly, that empathy facilitates socially appropriate behaviours (A10), and that it is, in itself a social behaviour (A7). The notion of others, physically present or otherwise, is a prerequisite for engaging in empathy.

I feel like it's important to read the room and read the person you are talking to. So you're not going to want to joke around about something if the other person is feeling very serious about something.
(A10)

[Empathy] is the ability to feel with someone. (A7)

Empathy was also described as having a social support function, or a social mechanism for support (A1, A12), due to its inherent intimacy (A10).

Also, just to be supportive. I think a lot of it has to do with being understanding and supportive of someone's feelings or whatever situation they may be going through. (A12)

If you take on too much of someone's problems and internalize that and feel that, then you start making their problems even worse because you're not being compassionate with yourself and being able to see from a good place and be able to help the person. Rather, you're just feeding their issues rather than being a support. (A1)

I think without empathy then it would just come across as very direct and impersonal. (A10)

Participant B2 suggested that empathy is called for when dealing with difficult social situations (B2).

So a good example of that for us, and I'm getting off topic here but I know you don't care, but about a month ago we recently got a blizzard here and communication when went out the president that you could either stay home if you're worried about travelling because it was going to be so miserable drive. And everybody was like well if I stay at home, because I was told to stay at home, am I still getting paid, or do I take vacation time, etc. etc. So that communication was very, very poor because people didn't understand what it was. So to look at the empathy side of it, we weren't empathetic of

the fact, while people might need to stay home with their children and people might be worried about power outages. (B2)

One participant highlighted the fact that empathy has a strong association with specific groups in society, and conveyed his belief that empathetic people have a tendency to come together, as opposed to pre-established groups of people developing empathetic tendencies (A6):

Nurses are empathetic, and I'm married to one. And I see that trait in just about everybody that became a nurse. ... Because all of, when we first met, and got married, the nurses were very empathetic in comparison to others... But I'm just trying to think of another group that would allow me to say I understand it. I probably don't. But I do know that there are, that the creative world and the artistic world, I would say are more empathetic than those that don't have a creative bone in them. And since I grew up in the 60s, the hippie generation, most of that crowd was very empathetic. And those that didn't participate were usually the hard-nosed. As I think about who cares and even now, it's the green movement, the people who are growing food for themselves, the sustainable crowd, the B Corp. movement is incredibly sympathetic, artistic, creative. (A6)

Finally, it was suggested that, without empathy quality-of-life declines (A3):

I think, if you went to work and you don't have relationships, or don't feel like you're being heard, it would kind of suck. (A3)

It was agreed upon by a majority of participants that empathy is non-universal and that it takes on characteristics of a continuous variable, with some people having more empathy than others, rather than it being simply present or absent (A6, B3).

I always thought [empathy] was a personality trait... I don't see it in other personalities (A6).

Some people are more empathetic than other people. Some people are cold and don't have a lot of empathy, right? (B3)

Only a certain proportion of people are able to successfully engage in empathetic interactions (A2).

Further, it was noted that empathy is not universally necessary to communicate; that communication can be effective when stripped of emotion and information is presented factually and directly (B4).

If you want to really connect with people, it's about understanding their perspective... any fool can talk about themselves, but it takes someone really intelligent to ask the questions, understand someone else's point of view in an argument. (A2)

I'll put it this way, Twitter is one of our social media mediums, primarily used for outages and where it's limited to so few characters we are really just focused on the facts. So I find in those cases, you kind of strip out the emotion, the empathy. So it is very factual, very direct. In our Facebook page, I think there's a greater, greater ability to incorporate empathy in communications. (B4)

One participant suggested that the development of empathy is facilitated by environment, particularly through the encouragement of empathetic and creative tendencies (A6).

So I think that's the answer I'll be able to give you and I think that's where you find the people. And they gravitate to it, it's not that they are being made. They gravitate to it because it is something, I can't say that they were born with it, I can say they were encouraged. (A6)

Several participants shared the belief that empathy is situational and largely context-dependent (B3).

Empathy seems to rise to the forefront when the situation calls for it, and is often constrained to a particular moment (A7, A8, A9, C2, A12).

It is the ability to understand how another person might be feeling in that situation. (A7)

I think empathy is the ability to place yourself into someone else's situation and understand a situation from their perspective. (A8)

Well with your family and your close friends you might have a long standing relationship where they want to be around you and they're going to be empathetic towards everything that you go through, whereas your work organization is, they'll be empathetic towards your current situation. (A9)

I think being able to under – to listen – understand somebody’s position and what it is that they’re going through (C2).

Being understanding and supportive of someone’s feelings or whatever situation they may be going through (A12).

Often, people experience empathy by imagining themselves in a particular circumstance and setting (B2). It is influenced by context in that, it is harder to feel empathy the less contextual information is available; empathy is aided by shared experiences and relatability (B3, A9, C1).

Kind of putting yourself in their situation and understanding what their concerns may be. (B2)

We always feel for our own, for staff, if something happens, if it's a major dramatic traumatic event that happens with your wife, your health. You feel for them to try and understand what they're going through, you try to do that. (B3)

So have a good idea of what the different roles in this company require and I know what it's like to be a shooter or to be an editor and work with the client and trying produce a product that's a good quality, and a timely nature. And I know what it's like to have the technology failing in the 11th hour. And I think, coming from the other side is a manager, as a producer, I also understand what it takes to get something done. So empathy plays a huge part because you can't go into a manager's office and just demand something, and I understand that it's something they've literally connected with the chemical at the drop of a hat, and I do put myself in their position and ask myself in their position, is this person really hard and are they just under stress? (A9)

I think on a personal level you would know someone better, I think you would tend to have more personal conversations than you would with a stakeholder you were talking to and your relationship with them. (C1)

One participant provided an example to illustrate his belief that racism is largely based in a lack of empathy propagated by a lack of shared experiences (A4).

It could be, it's a little harder to have empathy for, let's just use people as an example, another person when there is a zero contextual relationship. You can make yourself feel bad, or feel good, but it's hard to actually feel empathy when there is zero context. It's very difficult. And I think that's why racism exists. Let's look at racism is a perfect example. Where the stories have not been shared strongly enough between two different racial groups for each of them to realize that they are actually very similar and people will protect their own and understand their own and that they want to make sure the health and well-being of their own is protected, but once storytelling can create that empathetic bridge, they can realize that their tribe or their families are similar. (A4)

It was suggested by some participants that taking on the emotions or problems of others can cost individuals; that empathy can become burdensome rather than beneficial (A1, B4).

It's almost like taking on those emotions. (A1)

I'm defining it, I guess, as being able to take another person's feelings and having communications to match those. (B4)

Empathy was described as a manifestation of care for others; that it serves to communicate that others are valued (A6). This is of particular importance, according to one participant, when people are being called on to act selflessly. People who feel that they are valued and cared for will be more motivated to help or participate (A7).

There is a sense of care about them it didn't come with the general crowd when I was growing up. (A6)

Yeah, I think empathy is huge. It is one of the main ways that we show that we care and that we value people...I think whenever people are being called to a task or purpose or cause, I think empathy is really important because it can feel that they are valued in the pursuit of something that is maybe quite selfless. It's important, I think we all do better when we are asked to sacrifice perhaps. But we

know that we are valued in that, and maybe the person asking for the sacrifice appreciates what is being asked rather than someone giving the impression, I'm a cog in the wheel. (A7)

Strategic aspects of empathy.

Empathy can be strategic in several ways, as indicated by participants. Firstly, empathy allows individuals to anticipate how others may behave in particular situations and adapt their own behaviours accordingly (A7, C1). Others' feelings and experiences are collected as a resource to be considered for future actions or decision making (A11).

It is the ability to feel with someone. And sometimes you anticipate that a little bit too, you know, to imagine that something might be difficult or might be exciting, or threatening. (A7)

I think empathy involves listening to people and understanding where they're coming from, understanding their concerns, understanding their issues, and just listening. I think listening is an important part of empathy, and then just how you respond to what they're telling you (C1)

Empathy, I would say, is taking into account others' feelings. And being able to react and communicate based on those feelings. (A11)

When communicating, it's desirable to maintain an ongoing and active awareness of the audience and the environment, and what to expect of both (A8, A11).

I think it's important to sort of feel the emotion of and the perspective of the person you're working with. And going beyond that as well, that you can read and understand the organizational goals, the values, the culture of the company itself and trying to place yourself in a situation where you understand the other roles that you work with. (A8)

I feel like it's important to read the room and read the person you are talking to. (A11)

Empathy functions as a form of information-gathering that reveals audience needs and facilitates effective communication (B1, B3).

We use empathy to be sure that when we are communicating with them, that we understand. (B1)

People want something, so you try and get an idea try to understand why they want it, there's a reason behind it. That's basically what I try to do. (B3)

For organizations, this allows for greater understanding of internal and external stakeholders, increasing relatability and conflict resolution capabilities (C1, B3); there is a level of care that goes into organizational communications, a desire to strike the right note with an audience, identify gaps in stakeholder knowledge, stakeholder wants (C2).

I definitely see a role. I think it's very important that we understand our stakeholders and try to relate to them and I think that's important with staff as well too. I think that we have a staff of over 200 people at our Y and so it's important; there's always staffing issues, so it's important that we kind of dive in and understand why certain staff are having these issues and try to understand what they're going through, and deal with it accordingly. (C1)

You have to, that's about knowing your audience, you have to have a feel for what the customer is saying and you gotta, sometimes you gotta bite your tongue and be careful what you say back. (B3)

I'm always very careful when sending out any type of email or communication to our families because you want to make sure it's a positive communication. And sometimes that's difficult, when you want to tell them that their fees are going up or something else is happening, but just to make sure there's a positive tone to it... Yeah, just the information they would be looking for and making sure it's not too much, that the message isn't getting jumbled. What it is they would be looking for and how you can meet that need that they may have. (C2)

Some participants indicated that there is value in understanding others' perspectives, particularly the strategic value of having insight into others' motivations (A2). One participant replied that other perspectives should be 'appreciated,' which can be connotatively taken to mean that they have inherent value (A7).

I don't want to always assume that I'm right and there's value – even if I'm completely opposed to the other view – there's value in understanding someone else's point of view. (A2)

To understand how another person might be feeling in that situation, to appreciate their perspective. (A7)

Empathy's role in reducing tensions was mentioned by several participants. It was suggested that empathy can play a direct role in resolving conflicts because it allows for perspective taking that overpowers opposition and laying blame, and re-establishes order and positivity (A2, A5, A7, A11).

It's like, how would a little bit of empathy actually bring the tensions down, you know. Not everything needs to be so black-and-white. Can people try and see things from other people's points of view? So in the communication, I think it's like, it's easy to get worked up and defend your position on something, but the challenge, as human beings, is to bring empathy to every conversation and have the ability to at least respect somebody else's point of view, and try and think or even think or ask questions about what their point of view is. The more often that you understand, even though you might not agree with it, I think the healthier conversations can be. (A2)

There's also just being, having open communication, open to resolving mistakes. I think if you put yourself in the other person's position and try to figure out how you would feel if you made this error, then you are better able to handle it and work towards a solution, instead of being on opposite sides and opposing are laying blame. (A5)

When things are tough or when there are small communication breakdowns, if you establish enough empathy with people, you don't tend to question somebody's motives. Like maybe I don't like what you did, but I'm guessing you probably did it because you are in a difficult position. (A7)

So yeah, I think communication is a big thing. If someone's upset, take them into your office and see if anything's going on, if there's anything you can do. (A11)

Further, the presence of empathy can act as a conflict deterrent, preventing breakdowns of communication and helping to navigate situations where there is high potential for conflict (A9, B2).

I do put myself in their position and ask myself in their position, is this person really hard and are they just under stress. When that kind of relationship, I think that's where empathy plays a part. When communicating and be an issue. (A9)

So a good example of that for us, and I'm getting off topic here but I know you don't care, but about a month ago we recently got a blizzard here and communication when went out the president that you could either stay home if you're worried about travelling because it was going to be so miserable drive. And everybody was like well if I stay at home, because I was told to stay at home, am I still getting paid, or do I take vacation time, etc. etc. So that communication was very, very poor because people didn't understand what it was. So to look at the empathy side of it, we weren't empathetic of the fact, while people might need to stay home with their children and people might be worried about power outages. And something I think of right away is that maybe we didn't have empathy in those communications out, because that caused a lot of grief with people saying while you're making me come to work to get paid when it's not safe and are not taking into account the fact that I'm afraid to drive my car in the storm. (B2)

One participant suggested that engagement in empathy facilitates openness to new ideas, a departure from the notion that openness is a prerequisite for empathy. He likened empathy to a mental exercise, inferring that it empathetic capacity can increase with time and practice (A2).

The ability to understand somebody else's perspective. And not just basically, even if you do disagree with them, you are opening the conversation floor up to bigger possibilities. And you're not, just because you're taking a rock solid stance on something doesn't mean you're not open to what they're saying at all. And it's, I often find myself thinking about, even if I have one position I should think about how, what is the reasoning for someone's stance on something. What is behind that, what's their position, their feelings towards that. Why are they there. Often, even the mental exercise of

thinking that way, it opens up new possibilities of ways to communicate or ways to approach a situation. (A2)

The potential for empathy to manifest as action was explored by one participant (B3). The implications of this are that empathy can go beyond an individual experience.

We're a utility, a lot of customers complain. They complain the power's been out for 20 days, I feel for them, but they've got to understand the complexity of the event that happened, it's something they can't get the power back on immediately because there's a lot of work to do to get that certain point. So by being empathetic, you can provide warming shelters, you can understand their needs, talk to the people in the villages and say, oh you got to set up the warming shelter because we are going to be, you know, having this power out for a long period of time. (B3)

Communicative role.

All participants affirmatively agreed that empathy plays a role in communication, and a number of connections were identified. Firstly, empathy was perceived to influence message transmission processes. Empathy allows for clear reception of messages; particularly, it aids in interpreting or decoding messages and its absence disrupts message flow (B1, A10).

So for us, when we are looking at a communication, we want to be sure to communicate so that people understand and how it affects them, so like the what's in it for me? So we're trying to make sure that we're not trying to be too technical, want to make sure that when they're looking at the information they say okay, do I understand this and does mean something to me. So we are not to seeing it from a corporation or business perspective, we are seeing it through our customer's eyes and that's a huge piece of our social media piece, just to be sure that we are working, that we have that empathy. (B1)

I think without empathy you're struggling to get your message across in a personal way, that someone might not be able to interpret it in the right way... And I think without empathy then it would just come across as very direct and impersonal. (A10)

Empathy also facilitates effective communications, assisting with the tailoring of messages to best suit audience needs (B4). One participant did highlight that empathy's role in communication is dependent on the receiver's capacity for empathy and ability to interpret a message, emphasizing the importance of two-way communication (A6).

I'm defining it, I guess, as being able to take another person's feelings and having communications to match those. (B4)

I think it depends on the receiver. Because the deliverer is going to be empathetic regardless. If it's appreciated by the receiver, then it's a positive. But if that person is a bully then they won't even be heard. (A6)

Secondly, empathy was said to play a role in facilitating open and effective communications, and that it is often a consideration when developing communications (A5, A8, B1).

There's also just being, having open communication. (A5)

I think empathy underpins all good communication. If you don't understand the people that you're speaking to and what they experience and the challenges they experience, the goals they are trying to achieve, then it's very difficult to have effective communication. (A8)

So we are not to seeing it from a corporation or business perspective, we are seeing it through our customer's eyes and that's a huge piece of our social media piece, just to be sure that we are working, that we have that empathy is just to be sure that we are being, just that we have that empathy piece and that we are seeing it through their eyes. (B1)

Empathetic communications are considered more personal, and more intimate (A10). Further, empathy allows you to identify what the audience wants to know, ensuring relevant and useful messages are communicated (C2).

Without empathy then it would just come across as very direct and impersonal. (A10)

Yeah, it's hard. I mean when I think of communication, it can be within our staff team or out to the public, to parents. But I'm always very careful when sending out any type of email of communications to our families because you want to make sure it's a positive communication. ...Yeah, just the information they would be looking for and making sure it's not too much, that the message isn't getting jumbled. What it is they would be looking for and how you can meet that need that they may have. (C2)

Listening and storytelling were proposed as key to empathy's role in facilitating communication (B3, A4).

It was also suggested that more empathy is tied to healthier, more productive conversations (A2).

I think the key is listening, you gotta listen. It's a lot of us, a lot of us can learn from that. Listening first, and then understanding, and communicating back in understanding what they're requests are, and getting our message across, there are messages we want to get across, to get back to the main point, the end and what message we're trying to get it to the customer, to the media, to the city. (B3)

Storytelling can create that empathetic bridge...So that's what I see we do with storytelling, and that's why empathy is so important. (A4)

The more often that you understand, even though you might not agree with it, I think the healthier conversations can be. And more productive in terms of moving forward. Because if we just got here and argue that I love [candy] and you hate [candy], and I wasn't willing to understand you hated [candy], it's going to be really frustrating. But if we get into, or if you want to know why I love [candy]. Those are good conversations, if they're always constantly one-way, one-way, one-way versus a back-and-forth. (A2)

Finally, empathy was discussed as being inherently communicative in nature and foundational to effective communicative practices (B3, A8). One participant equated communication to empathy directly (A4).

I think the key is listening, you gotta listen. It's a lot of us, a lot of us can learn from that. Listening first, and then understanding, and communicating back in understanding what their requests are, and

getting our message across, there are messages we want to get across, to get back to the main point, the end and what message we're trying to get it to the customer, to the media, to the city. (B3)

Absolutely, yeah. I think communication, I think empathy underpins all good communication. If you don't understand the people that you're speaking to and what they experience and the challenges they experience, the goals they are trying to achieve, then it's very difficult to have effective communication. (A8)

While yeah, communication is empathy. Communication is the bridge to create empathy... storytelling can create that empathetic bridge... So that's what I see we do with storytelling, and that's why empathy is so important. (A4)

Organizational empathy was briefly touched on in this section of the interview. Participants highlighted the fact that, in organizations, the desire and pursuit of empathy can be constrained by company policies and professional standards (B3, A11, A12).

And I think there's a line, there still a line you gotta put in for us. We're a utility, a lot of customers complain. They complain the power's been out for 20 days, I feel for them, but they've got to understand the complexity of the event that happened, it's something they can't get the power back on immediately because there's a lot of work to do to get that certain point. (B3)

The feelings that you're getting, you have to keep them more to yourself in a professional relationship, you're not always as open as in a personal relationship. (A11)

So sometimes interpersonal issues can get in the way, so empathy can only go so far in that if someone is having a hissy fit and being inappropriate and then an appropriate situation and you have to say, okay, this is where friendship ends. So I think empathy is important, but also professionalism is important. (A12)

Empathy can exist in the workplace, but there is greater capacity for it in interpersonal relationships (B3).

One participant suggested that within organizations, empathy means engaging with both the organization and its members (A8).

I think in workplace, you have guidelines that we have to follow, rules that are set in place by our board. So you can only go so far. If it was personal empathy, I think you can, there's a little more, you can have a little more, you can have your own personal, you're willing to go a little further on your own personal, personal level rather than on a company level. It's a fine line, you think, you have to, on the company's side of communication sometimes you have to take your personal feelings out of it, knowing it's almost like a switch. You turn the switch and put the company, that is empathy, back on. That's my feeling, myself, you know? (B3)

I think it's important to sort of feel the emotion of and the perspective of the person you're working with. And going beyond that as well, that you can read and understand the organizational goals, the values, the culture of the company itself and trying to place yourself in a situation where you understand the other roles that you work with. (A8)

The lack of empathy in an organization, according to one participant, could be taken as permission for corporate greed to take over (A4). Another participant emphasized that organizational empathy can be a polarizing topic, either particularly evident or noticeably absent (A1). This fits in with a sentiment shared by many participants: bad things happen when there is a lack of empathy.

Corporations are run by human beings and all human beings have a soul, all human beings have feelings and emotions. And as soon as we allow the corporate structure to be an individual in itself. By law a corporation is considered an individual, it pays taxes, it's an entity. As soon as we allow that entity not to have feelings, apathy, emotion, and bad things happen. That's when corporate greed happens, all this damage happens because the caring, empathetic, loving people within the corporate structure, they are not allowing their love, their empathy to define what the corporate structure is. That's a really easy excuse to work for a nasty company if you're a very loving person, community

mindful and you care about equal rights and humanity and the environment, you might work for Monsanto. In Monsanto, for me as an example of a company that doesn't have, that hasn't operated and grown with empathy. It's all the greed and building something up at all costs. So that's why I don't think there should be a difference, because we are allowing, we're empowering the corporate entity to not have emotion and empathy. (A4)

There's very few people I've worked with, and I think for a good working relationship, you have to have a good balance. Like with each other too, but I've noticed that there's either not enough empathy or maybe too much. (A1)

One participant maintained that organizations have a responsibility to actively engage in empathy when communicating (B1).

We use empathy to be sure that when we are communicating with them, that we understand that you know we can make arrangements to help them get through those cold winter months. (B1)

There was some disagreement among participants as to how treatment of organizational relationships should differ from interpersonal relationships. Several participants believe that there should be no difference in treatment (A4, A5).

There shouldn't be a difference between, you and I, talking to each other and on a personal level and then on a corporate level. Why would we separate those? Corporations are run by human beings and all human beings have a soul, all human beings have feelings and emotions. (A4)

And it's very important... and I think that it doesn't change between interpersonal and organizational relationships. I think for us especially, we try and treat all clients as though they were part of our organization and treat our organization members as if they are friends. Thus we try and have really strong relationships with all of our clients. I would treat them like I would treat a friend. So no difference. (A5)

Others felt that there were distinct differences worth noting (A8, A9).

It's a little bit different because the thing with personal relationships is – it's a good question – I think with personal relationships, the relationship is tied together by social commonalities, commonality of relationships or of interests with someone, and is largely voluntary. If you find yourself in a relationship that you feel has become unhealthy or unhelpful then it's reasonably easy to withdraw. Organizationally you are, for better or worse in a set of relationships that could be long-term. Positive or not. And ideally positive. So in an organization, I think there has to be a stronger sense of, definitely tolerating differences. Not that you wouldn't in personal relationships, but just to a different degree. (A8)

It's definitely going to be different I think because you have, well with your family and your close friends you might have a long- standing relationship where they want to be around you and they're going to be empathetic towards everything that you go through, whereas your work organization is, they'll be empathetic towards your current situation, but it's not necessarily applied to everything at work. So if you're busy and you can't do your work, your co-worker wouldn't be as empathetic as your friend. Your co-worker would be like, just get it done. But if your dog died, obviously your co-worker would be empathetic because, while your dog died. (A9)

One participant suggested that it wasn't possible to distinguish as she felt she was always representing her organization, on and off the clock (C2); another participant suggested that it was context-dependent, citing her organization as an 'exception to the rule' where she was treated like a friend (A12).

I'd like to think that I'm an empathetic person with everybody. ...And I represent the Y when I'm working here. I represent the Y when I'm home or out in the community as well. (C2)

[Org. A] is an exception to that rule. Because we are all friends. I came in from the corporate world to join [Org. A] and I was very much used to, budgets and rules and order, and your coworkers or colleagues, you aren't friends with them. And here, you are very much friends with them. So sometimes interpersonal issues can get in the way, so empathy can only go so far in that if someone is having a hissy fit and being an appropriate and then an appropriate situation and you have to say,

okay, this is where friendship ends. So I think empathy is important, but ousting professionalism is important. (A12)

Overall, there did seem to be a shared desire to bring empathy into both personal and organizational relationships, and an agreement that empathetic needs change at the individual level in both organizational and personal contexts (C2, B4).

I'd like to think that I'm an empathetic person with everybody. (C2)

So every time someone comes through the door, they have a different need, and I have to respond to those differently. Some people need a lot more attention than others, so a lot more empathy with those. It varies with the individual. (B4)

Several participants mentioned the need for balance, or reciprocity, in both personal and organizational communication contexts (A3). One participant suggested that two-way or symmetrical empathy is the best case for facilitating good working relationships, over indulgence and empathy reduces productivity (A1), while another stated that in an ideal scenario, those you have empathy for, will empathize with you (B3).

I think it's very important and there should be an equal balance for sure. (A3)

I think for a good working relationship; you have to have a good balance [of empathy]. Like with each other too, but I've noticed that there's either not enough empathy or maybe too much.

[Researcher: Could you give me an example of too much?] Yeah, like almost, if you take on too much of someone's problems and internalize that and feel that, then you start making their problems even worse because you're not being compassionate with yourself and being able to see from a good place and be able to help the person. (A1)

We're a utility, a lot of customers complain. They complain the power's been out for 20 days, I feel for them, but they've got to understand the complexity of the event that happened. (B3)

Interview Themes: Empathy's Relation to Opinion Leadership

In Section 2, one emergent theme was identified: Empathy and Opinion Leadership. This theme comprises a number of focussed subthemes, which will be discussed in a later section.

Empathy and opinion leadership.

Opinion leaders were perceived by participants to be embedded within a community or communities, wielding influence within enclosed circles of influence (A2, A3, A7).

And it's funny, because so many people know at this point, maybe even know who I am or know that the organization. I don't even know. They know who we are. And know what the brand is, so often I underestimate how much presence we have in this whole community. Because you know you just get your head down and you work, and you go out in the community and to hear someone, or you talk to someone or someone introduces themselves, or you can email from someone saying, you guys are amazing, we love what you do, being a B Corp and doing all this stuff. (A2)

But I think, I think in a very positive way it is [an opinion leader]. Supporting other businesses, planning events. [Researcher: So would you say, it is an opinion leader equally amongst its employees as well as at the community?] Yeah, I think kind of works in the same way, where I mean you are part of the community. (A3)

I think, I look at what we have and it is circles of influence. Some companies have big circles, so [for example] Elon Musk would have a huge circle of influence. (A7)

One participant noted that feedback and outside perception formed the basis for self-evaluation as an opinion leader (A2). Another added his belief that there are education and communication components to opinion leadership (B1).

They know who we are. And know what the brand is, so often I underestimate how much presence we have in this whole community...You can [sometimes] forget about what the outside perception is. (A2)

So we are trying to show people and educate them on how to be energy efficient and use your dollar a lot more efficiently in your home. So that's how I would see, as a leader, our business is influencing the external, you know, stakeholders. (B1)

Several participants agreed that opinion leadership is achieved by running, or leading, an organization with a specific set of goals in mind; one of these being to influence behaviour (A12, B1). A participant noted that opinion leadership is often dependent on organizational leadership and public facing workers (B3).

And I think Greg has set himself out to have as many experiences as possible and to direct his film work towards specific goals. So I would say he would fall under the opinion leadership, some people may disagree with that, but yeah, he is running the organization under a specific mode of operation and a specific end goal. (A12)

Oh, there are things, we do provide information. One of the influencers would be that we start moving towards energy efficiency for example. Trying to influence people to change their habits. Help them lower their bills for example, would be something that, from communications, we try and help them understand and change. (B1)

So you know, I can say, and I'm kind of on the fence on that one, because it's been, how old and stern the people you have on your management team and your president. If they are out front, well spoken, clean and clear and they accept the media, and outside, they get a better perception of you. The public gets a better perception of you, that hey yes, this company is trying to do

something for us. They're not hiding behind glass walls and building up an umpire from inside.

(B3)

There was general agreement among participants that empathy could be positively correlated with organizational influence, though this was communicated in a variety of ways (A6, A1). Firstly, many participants indicated that empathy is attractive; people are attracted to those that care for others (A4).

It is. It's definitely an influence. Yes. (A6)

I do believe that you can have more influence by being more empathetic. (A1)

Empathy, it's very attractive, when people are empathetic to you. I see empathy as a bridge, a connection. I am going to be more attracted to another human if I know they care about me in some way. (A4)

Empathy facilitates connections, encourages stakeholder buy-in both financially and emotionally (A5, A9, B4). With this knowledge, organizations can draw particular target audiences and build influence among them (A11).

I think so yes, because I think you get buy-in, you get client buy-in, you strengthen those relationships. I think it improves your credibility and reliability. (A5)

I think a lot of people like interacting with folks that are more empathetic than people who are less empathetic. But I don't know if it's a reflection – I think it would be nice to say that if everyone at work and an organization was more empathetic that the organization had more impact. (A9)

I think if you can incorporate empathy, that people respond that better, and that your message communicates a bit more. I think it is difficult to do that but I would agree that the public do like the empathy. (B4)

I've been here for about a year now, but they did release [documentary title] which for me was pretty influential. I know other people...might have different opinions about it, but I think they do have influence and they try to be an opinion leader. (A11)

In the same vein, one participant suggested that organizations that often go beyond the call of duty (in terms of empathy) are more likely to resonate and build influence (A12); this includes empathetic actions, which can generate influence according to another participant (B3).

Being a caring organization and being willing to go the extra mile for individuals or meet with them face-to-face to understand the problem and find the solution means so much more than just a standard cookie-cutter corporate response. (A12)

You look at some of the things they're trying to work at in the city, with the homeless, and with feeding people. We support that, we support the food banks, you can go so far. But I think if you do that, you become more known in your city, in your town, and hey this company is very, they are very supportive of us. They understand, with the homeless, the food and shelter you're trying to provide to people, to the community... We want to make sure there are improvements in our community by doing these things. So we are empathetic towards that, those people. (B3)

Empathy, as suggested by one participant, is believed to help strengthen relationships, which along with credibility, reliability, respect, drive influence (A5). Further, it was suggested that empathy can serve to influence people to make good decisions without moving into coercion (A7); it is also seen to facilitate greater knowledge of and connection to stakeholders (C1).

I think so yes, because I think you get buy-in, you get client buy-in, you strengthen those relationships. I think it improves your credibility and reliability. I think you have more – I hate to use the word influence – I don't want it to sound as though you're manipulating. I think influence through strong relationships, and good strong, you know, respect. (A5)

So I think there can be more influence in something like that. In other areas, sadly, it may not matter at all. I think that a certain amount of empathy can influence people to make better choices, without being coerced. (A7)

Yeah, as a result of that, I think you're more in tune to your people right, if you're empathetic toward them. So yes, yeah, I would say big time. (C1)

As advocated by one participant, empathy may impact influence to the greatest extent if the audience is open to different perspectives; people, depending on their openness to new ideas, are most likely to be influenced by those that hold the same values (A2).

Yeah, ultimately, I think it's really important. I don't know, it's really important. It's going to be one of those things like, really it kind of ends up being like, practicing to the converted a little bit may be. To people who are open a little bit more. But there are still super entrenched people who are like, who aren't interested in listening to anybody else's perspectives, which makes their field of view pretty narrow. Maybe a good company, if they have the kind of influence, maybe it's really good for the organization as a whole... Yeah, I don't really know the answer. I would hope so, that it's a good thing. In my current thinking it is. Exploring different points of view and getting people to think about them. (A2)

Organizations can attempt to build their existing influence by improving community relationships, improving public perception, increasing relatability and engaging in organizational storytelling (B3, C1, C2).

Years ago, the paper wasn't good, and I think that was because of communication. We weren't out in front of the media, bringing them in and showing them what we were doing. Over the last eight years we've been inviting media into some of our events, going to, communicating to the media so they understand what we're working on. So I think that changes their opinion of who we are and how we work and how we focus. (B3)

I think in some cases we try to be an opinion leader, absolutely. Social media is a difficult one because sometimes you can set out to share a story and then you might have some people comment on that story negatively or not in the way that you would have hoped so it can kind of backfire on you a little bit. But I think absolutely we try to be, in the stories we share. And I think that's really become the way we communicate with everyone is sharing [Org. C] stories. So it's sharing stories of individuals that have different experiences with the Y and so people understand our impact better. So I think that's a big part of it. (C1)

Absolutely. Yeah, I think we're always, we're very big on our Y stories, so any time we have a meeting, we're putting information out to the community all the time, on our Facebook site we talk about newcomers and the refugees. When we're doing these things, there's always a positive spin to it. Sometimes we need help, but there's always a positive spin to it. Like we need help, but we're raising funds to send children to camp. That sort of thing. And so I think that we're very big on our stories and getting the word out there. As you said with the op-ed, people are going to form opinions about what we are saying and we want them to see it from the same perspective.

(C2)

Fence-standing was suggested as a potential tactic for building organizational influence through openness to various perspectives (A8).

So one of the things we are trying very hard to be is what we call, not a rock, but a fence stander. And what that basically means is that whatever – so we feel like the rock throwing approach to communication is actually very unhelpful and very un-empowering. So in the documentary world, in the media world and someone, you often in the communications world see someone saying I have a very strong opinion I'm going to throw a very strong flaming message, and collect the data and the content I want to support that message. But that typically doesn't do too much in terms of actually benefiting anyone are encouraging people to change. And so what we talk about or what we want the public to talk about someone that looks at both perspectives, initiates, and tries to

communicate an idea that's fair and that can be heard by both perspectives. And I think everybody, we all have opinions and perspectives that we try and sell to other people or other organizations regardless of what that opinion is, but as an organization we try very, very hard to not be kind of a rock thrower but fence stander and tell both sides of the story. (A8)

Several participants noted that not all organizations strive to be opinion leaders, some just want to get a message out and don't prioritize influence (B3). In addition, many non-empathetic companies establish wide circles of influence (A7, A9).

We generally, I guess, from my perspective, my own level from where I've been here for years. I don't think we want to, I guess I'm trying to think our goal is to kind of get our message out there. (B3)

So sometimes people or organizations who are incredibly influential are actually not very empathetic; sometimes people that accomplish great things have more extreme personalities and actually don't do so well in the human interaction side of things. (A7)

I think it depends on the organization and the industry. I think there are also real jackass companies that there who are not empathetic and incredibly driven and cutthroat, I don't care about how things are being done. It's hard for me to imagine any specific stream. But it's hard for me to imagine Steve Jobs being empathetic and his company has changed the entire industry. (A9)

There was agreement among participants that becoming an opinion leader is desirable, and that their organizations were striving to be opinion leaders (A9, B4).

I think [Org. A] as an organization is an opinion leader. And that's what we're striving to be. I think the gap that is there, I think in some regards yes, we are. I think it's where we want to go. I think the gap in getting there is that we need to be more value aligned with the work that we take on. But it's a little bit of the chicken and egg. We need to be able to do the work that we are doing right now to keep the doors open so we can find more work that value aligned with what we want

to do. So, again, if capitalism and all that stuff if that wasn't an issue and we could do only the work that we were passionate about and value aligned about I can easily say, yes, absolutely we are there. We are where we want to be. But it's never that simple, I think if money wasn't an issue, we could just do projects that we feel passionate about. And I think we're building in that direction, but it's a steeper wall to climb when you have to, I don't want to say we take on a lot of smarmy work because we don't. But projects that were hyper passionate about. (A9)

I think yeah, there's the drive to move to it, but I don't think where they're now. (B4)

One participant suggested that opinion leadership stems from a desire to share a point of view with an audience (C2); another, that organizations should look to have and share opinions given their experience with a particular industry (A2).

People are going to form opinions about what we are saying and we want them to see it from the same perspective. (C2)

So for me, it's important, and I love people and companies that do this, that can be showing those different points of view and asking, what if we thought about this, this group or person, or whatever it is. (A2)

Ideally, one participant noted, organizations would focus on exploring and optimizing influence in communities of like-minded people, community focus and priority (A6). In addition, opinion leadership would ideally be associated with breaking ground in a particular industry (A7).

So really, the influence is important, but the influence to the community are more important.

There's no point in a business putting in tons of effort to influence those that are outside the community. It's great if it happens, but that can't be your focus. The community of like-minded customers, or like-minded contractors, that's definitely where the influence it. (A6)

I don't know if we are breaking ground in the way we approach found or the content of our films. We are part of a particular – well right now we are a B Corp., a conscientious business. But in that stream, I don't think were shaking it up. (A7)

Opinion leadership, and the influence that entails, can be perceived with a positive or negative lens, according to participants (A3, A12). The negative connotation of opinion leadership is associated with organizations that use their influence to manipulate stakeholders.

I guess yeah, yeah, I wouldn't say they would go so far as to be malicious about it. (A3)

Oh yes. It's interesting that you say opinion instead of thought leadership, because there can be such a positive or negative spin. You can see an opinion as negative connotation to it, but no it's just the viewpoints. (A12)

Opinion leadership is largely situation-dependent (A9, A11, C2). As one participant remarked, sometimes, depending on industry, there is no flexibility to be creative or innovative (A5). Another participant also reflected that, especially online, opinion leadership can sometimes be usurped by loss of message control, especially online (C1).

So, again, if capitalism and all that stuff if that wasn't an issue and we could do only the work that we were passionate about and value aligned about I can easily say, yes, absolutely we are there. We are where we want to be. But it's never that simple, I think if money wasn't an issue, we could just do projects that we feel passionate about. (A9)

Yes, I feel like I also depends on what type of organization you speaking to. If you're speaking of [Org. A], it's very important to who they are, social media and everything. (A11)

Part of working here is developing relationships with people and they leave their children with us, and they want to, they should, trust us, so I think that's a huge part of it. Other places might be, no here's the answer, that's what it is. But I think empathy is a huge part in a non-profit organization.

I think in my area, in my industry, because the rules-based, because accounting is so roles based, there's not a lot of room for opinion. Like I say I think you have \$15,000 in the bank, because you have X amount of dollars in the bank. There's not a lot of room. I think where he can be influencers is to guide people to follow said rules. But again, it's not so much our influence it's more our interpretation of the rule. So I'm not sure that I'm, I can be a positive influence or in terms of steering people in the right direction with regard to rules. (A5)

Social media is a difficult one because sometimes you can set out to share a story and then you might have some people comment on that story negatively or not in the way that you would have hoped so it can kind of backfire on you a little bit. (C1)

With respect to Organization A, it was widely acknowledged that their CEO's personal brand had separated from the organization's to the extent that both the person and the organization were opinion leaders, or capable of becoming so (A1, A2, A7, A10, A12).

With [G] as the CEO of [Organization A] – he is an opinion leader, he definitely wears that on his sleeve I think. So definitely [Org. A] is, absolutely, it falls into that category. (A1)

Two seconds on that answer. One is Greg. Because Greg is definitely, has definitely worked to position himself as a bit of a thought leader in his space. Like he's doing a TED talk this weekend. It may not be exactly defined what he's a thought leader in. He's kind of championing social impact storytelling, or whatever they're calling it, using film for social impact. Films that inspire people to go do something. So he's injecting in that realm of thoughts. He is speaking in the United States and in Canada and stuff like that. So he has his own personal...brand, which is that. And it has direct impact on our brand at [Org. A] as a collective. I would say yes, but we are not, there's no one face to that. It's kind of a collective. And we haven't pushed ourselves into formulating it probably as good as he should. There's a lot of people that know us, some people that know us, know the brand, no we make good films, but there's no one person they can

necessarily tag. Because Greg is so much bigger than just the [Org. A] brand. He is almost his own brand now. (A2)

Greg is an amazing communicator, interpersonal person. Like his skills are off the charts. And through that maybe, as much as anything, what Greg would talk about would have some influence and would resonate. So I don't know if we as a company are. (A7)

Yeah, totally. Greg is very passionate about the B Corp. movement and spreading the word about it. And yeah, I could see him as an opinion leader. Yeah definitely. And I think it helps to that they're kind of like in the creativity sector. (A10)

And I think Greg has set himself out to have as many experiences as possible and to direct his film work towards specific goals. So I would say he would fall under the opinion leadership, some people may disagree with that, but yeah, he is running the organization under a specific mode of operation and a specific end goal [Researcher: Does that goal a line with the organization or is there a point where Greg separates from your organization?] I think there's a point where Greg will separate. (A12)

Among participants, there was some agreement that opinion leaders often occupy a very specific leadership niche, influencing a community of like-minded individuals (A1, A2).

I think so, and definitely through film and storytelling. (A1)

One is Greg. Because Greg is , has definitely worked to position himself as a bit of a thought leader in his space (A2)

Further, it was suggested that the perception as being a subject matter expert in a specific field can differ from actually being an opinion leader (B2).

I think of our new, while not new now, the president has more communication role that does influence. He does a lot of speaking engagements if he can, get people to commit to what he's saying. But I don't think we're there yet. I don't know if people, like for the website, I think people

do come to the website for energy saving tips and I do see us as a leader in that field, so maybe they would take us as leader in that aspect and we can be an opinion leader in that scenario, but I'm not sure for actually influencing people. (B2)

Empathy was described as being relatively new to the business world, and having been introduced by influential B. Corp and sustainability-related movements; in this vein, empathy can become part of the organization's identity (A6, A11).

But I think the sustainable movements, the B Corp. movement, are introducing empathy and an awareness to the community that has never heard of it, this has not been heard in the boardrooms of companies. But there is a Harvard study a couple of years ago, probably three years ago that looked at the recession in North America, and the companies that did the best financially were the social entrepreneurs with empathy, and a lot of them were B Corps. That's incredible. (A6)

Yes, I feel like I also depends on what type of organization you speaking to. If you're speaking of [Org. A], it's very important to who they are (A11).

Balance was also discussed by participants with respect to opinion leadership; that it is possible to build influence through establishing a sense of reciprocity between the organization and its stakeholders (A1, A8).

I think it would be helpful. I always speak of balance, so if you're able to provide employees with a really good place to work, then they're going to need to embrace your brand outside the doors. So in being empathetic, means if you're being respectful of them as human beings, I do believe that you can have more influence by being more empathetic, but not overly empathetic. (A1)

The guys that tend to be really encrusted in these purpose driven organizations are really highly empathetic side of things. They see the bigger picture and think about the footprint are having in their society and how their business is benefiting stakeholders and how at the same time the business has to work, so it's gotta be a great product, great service and bring value back to the company, the business community and the people they are serving. So gotta be a balance. (A8)

Several participants agreed that organizational opinion leadership can be constrained, prevented from reaching its full potential by business needs. Though these constraints slow progress, organizations can still build influence over time (A9, A12).

I think the gap in getting there is that we need to be more value aligned with the work that we take on. But it's a little bit of the chicken and egg. We need to be able to do the work that we are doing right now to keep the doors open so we can find more work that value aligned with what we want to do. (A9)

I get that at the end of the day the company still has to make money so as much as great may want to only work with, this is a bad example, but if he only wanted to work with green companies, the reality is that we are situated in St. John New Brunswick. And if the client comes to us who isn't necessarily green or who was in following a specific mode of operation, you still have to grow your business and you still have to be able to afford a business. (A12)

The empathetic organization was introduced in this section in a number of ways, and explored in greater detail in the following section. One participant acknowledged that running a business with positive output and positive social impact often takes empathetic people, and that empathy supports purpose-driven organizational behaviour (A8). It was also implied by some participants that there are both costs and limitations to organizational empathy (B3, A8). And finally, one participant inquired as to whether people should fight for more empathy in mainstream organizations (A9).

And so what we talk about or what we want the public to talk about someone that looks at both perspectives, initiates, and tries to communicate an idea that's fair and that can be heard by both perspectives. And I think everybody, we all have opinions and perspectives that we try and sell to other people or other organizations regardless of what that opinion is, but as an organization we try very, very hard to not be kind of a rock thrower but fence stander and tell both sides of the story... So we have an opinion that we share the end of it, but we try and share a balanced story with their viewers. So all parties can engage around that, and maybe can say okay that's a good

point, and maybe we can see it from other perspectives. And so hopefully that can actually bring parties closer together. (A8)

I still think there's a line you have to draw on the sand. (B3)

I think it would be nice to say that if everyone at work and an organization was more empathetic that the organization had more impact. But capitalism and the rest of the world and Western culture specifically is so volatile and so unpredictable. It's sad in a lot of ways that you can just have these monsters ruling. There's no empathy to be found. So I think it's the good fight to do all that I can about it. But I'm not sure I could definitively say more but that some companies have more impact. (A9)

Interview Themes: The Empathetic Organization

In Section 3, five emergent themes were identified: Characteristics of Empathetic Organizations; Legitimacy of Empathetic Organizations; Benefits of Implementing Cultures of Empathy; Challenges of Implementing Cultures of Empathy; and, Differentiating Organizational Empathy. Each of these themes comprise a number of focussed subthemes, which will be discussed in a later section.

Characteristics of an empathetic organization.

There was some agreement among participants that engagement in perspective taking is a key characteristic of empathetic organizations (B1, A1, C2).

And I think to be an empathetic company, you have to be really looking at it from the outside in. (B1)

I think, just what I said before about putting yourself in the shoes of another human being and thinking about how everybody's different. So having a broad spectrum of empathy as an organization. And support, whether it stems from executives or a grass roots movement of bringing in people who have that quality. (A1)

I think listening would be a big one. I'm trying to think back to what I just said. Just what I said, putting yourself into someone – I'm trying to think of another way to say it. But yeah, putting yourself in someone else's situation, being sympathetic to what people are going through. I might come up with more if you come back to that one (C2)

Empathetic organizations were perceived to be those with an active interest in understanding their stakeholder's experiences, needs and wants (B3, A11).

I think an empathetic organization is an organization that communicates with its employees, its community and clearly has an understanding of what's going on in the community and what people need and what people want. There's a lot of different needs and wants and us in the company, we can't solve everyone's issue, but we can let the community know what we're doing, here's what we're trying, to be part of the community. (B3)

You probably hear this a lot but, treat others as you would like to be treated...And trying to understand where the other person is coming from, even if that's not necessarily how you feel about it (A11)

Several participants pointed to an understanding and appreciation for work-life balance, and its challenges, as a distinctive characteristic of empathetic organizations (A12, A10, A12). One participant added that empathetic organizations consider stakeholder needs, attempt to meet them and foster positive relationships as a result (A7). Another suggested that empathetic organizations strive to create an environment suited to the needs of working style of its employees (A12).

I've thought about this many times. I think an empathetic organization would have flexible hours, I think it would be a much more relaxed or casual environment for work, but at the same time I feel would have a good internal structure to deal with any issues or problems that may come up. (A12)

I feel like our business really is, to be honest I used to work for Exxon Mobile which is the largest company in the world and while my direct supervisors were empathetic towards my personal

issues, I wouldn't say that they were necessarily empathetic towards everything. Like if I had to go to a children's concert, well it was like you need to take time off to do that kind of stuff. And then, well we lost our jobs. Everyone in Saint John got laid off. And the reason for that was cheaper labor. All the jobs went to India and places like that. So my opinion of that company being empathetic is not, you know. So when I started here, I think it was the job with the company that I never thought existed. Because you know, they get it. They get the work life balance. They know that kid concerts happen every, every whatever it is, Easter, Christmas, so they know summer break is hard. So for me it's very important because I have three kids. So be able to go to an organization where they know that three kids can be crazy. That's huge for me. (A10)

I think we are doing okay in growing and also empathizing with the situations of many of our clients. We had a situation where one, somebody was close to us, was a potential client and had shock when they saw the quote and was kind enough to let us know that and it helped a couple of our people to enter into the scenario of perhaps a small business with a limited budget. And kind of, we can do better. Because if we come out with budgets that are okay for industry or maybe not for that small business, and maybe even making them embarrassed that they were so far off. But I thought \$2000 and you've just quoted me 20, so I feel like an idiot. And so it helped us a little too, to appreciate sort of the situation of some clients that come to us. I think that's, that's what's important. And we'll come up with different things. I was in small business, so I feel like I can resonate... So I understand when somebody says something will cost a lot of money. Yeah, I think we are not too bad and I think we are growing and probably understanding our clients' needs. We do a lot of corporate video. I think for those clients it's really important that he come in on time and on budget. If you can do that, you made them 80% happy. So I think it is important to be effective. It also makes for better client experience. They come away feeling like that was actually fun, I really enjoyed that. (A7)

I think being understanding of human needs is maybe more important at the end of the day than meeting a deadline or being flexible with what people need. On a whole other side of that, I also think an empathetic organization would be one that supports healthy habits amongst its employees. (A12)

Empathetic organizations are characteristically open to other worldviews, without bias, according to one participant (A4); and, according to others, they remain aware of surroundings take into account the context, environment, surrounding the business (A7, C1, A8).

At least a willingness to be open to exploring other people's values. Their worldviews. It's a nonjudgmental environment. Yeah, that about something up. It's about those two things, it really covers a lot. (A4)

Organizations that are listening to general trends on the one hand and organizations that are not afraid to take responsibility. (A7)

When I think of empathetic, empathetic is also giving. Like you're a giving person, or you're a giving organization. So that jumps to mind. Giving and in tune and aware, I guess, is what I would say. (C1)

So it's thinking more about the context you're building a business in, and to the people and societies that it touches in building a business. (A8)

Multiple participants named respect as a component of empathetic organizations; empathetic organizations respect stakeholders, and organization members respect the values and position of other members (A1, A4). Thus, universal agreement among employees is not required to function if there is respect. One participant noted that there has been recent a shift occurring towards greater organizational respect for stakeholders, but that this remains industry and size-dependent (A1).

It definitely would be respectful of people's lives and wellbeing. And I think there's a shift happening where we're seeing more of that or hearing a lot more of that today. (A1)

An empathetic organization first of all, would have a team that respects each other's values and place. And that's not easy. Especially as an organization grows, presuming. But in a real, ideal one, it forces cohesion of staff. They don't need to necessarily agree on things, but they have to respect each other right. (A4)

Many participants agree that empathetic organizations are characterized by an openness to voices, contributions and ideas; they encourage participation and open relationships, fostering an environment where everyone feels valued (A11, B1, A5 A2, A3).

Obviously, so for me, being able to ask questions...I think just trying to look at your employees as more than just employees. I know it doesn't work for every organization, but for me coming from a smaller organization where there's only 4 people in my office. If one person gets upset or mad with another, everyone in the room can kind of feel that way. So yeah, I think communication is a big thing. If someone's upset, take them into your office and see if anything's going on, if there's anything you can do. (A11)

I would say most people feel that they have the ability to offer suggestions if they need to change. (B1)

So if I have an employee come to me and say I had a really hard drop-off at school, I have children, and having a rough day, I would like to think that I'm open enough or we fostered an open relationship where my employee would feel comfortable saying that. (A5)

So, I think in an empathetic situation, we all have different views, opinions and stances on where we should move to. And I would hope we all are able to bring those views and opinions and thoughts to the table and share them. (A2)

It would look something like this organization, yeah. I think it is. It's a nice place to work. You are heard. You get to talk to people. (A3)

Further, such organizations listen to and acknowledge stakeholder concerns, leading to a sense of member fulfillment and unity (B4). Organization members feel they have the right to respectfully debate; they are accepting of other viewpoints and are able to be productive despite differences of opinions (A2).

I think just listening and diplomacy is a huge part of it, so listening to individual's concerns and acknowledging them, that's a huge part, and then maybe being diplomatic in responses as well. So diplomacy is a major factor of empathy in that you may need to tailor responses to certain concerns in certain ways with individuals. (B4)

And once everyone has given their view and it's acknowledged and everyone has the ability to kind of wrestle with those ideas and throw out some good ones and some bad ones, get rid of the bad ones and narrow in on the good ones, and then be able to take it to action. (A2)

It was agreed upon by some participants that successful empathetic organizations are driven by a number of factors, not just the presence of empathy (A2). Empathetic organizations are perceived to care about their stakeholders and promote cultures of kindness and well-being; they engage in critical thinking, openness and flexibility as a matter of course (A9, A10, A12).

I don't think its empathy alone that is required to build those kind of organizations. (A2)

I think empathy, critical thinking and kindness is, are some real undervalued characteristics and culture, under nurtured in our population. And we do not feel that way, that they are not of value. (A9)

just being empathetic towards other people, to just be nice. I don't know how to explain it, just like caring about their employees. Not thinking of them as number. (A10)

On a whole other side of that, I also think an empathetic organization would be one that supports healthy habits amongst its employees. People work really late, they work in cubicles, people don't eat properly, they don't exercise, so personally working at [Org. A] I ran two half marathons

while working here and was given time off to travel to run races. Everyone was 100% supportive of me living my healthy dream. And I see other businesses they don't do that. (A12)

Empathetic organizations are characterized by characterized by creative, cohesive collaboration and a commitment to being accountable for wrongs (A3, A7).

I guess, well starting off with a good leader, someone you can trust and who allows you to explore your own will. Everybody gets along, it's a collaborative, creative group. (A3)

I'm not saying that I'm responsible for [someone's] pain or in some legal or financial way, but I can sure say that I'm very sorry you're in a situation or someone may say look, I'm injured here I can't work, and I can empathize with her situation. And we can get the point where we can say okay, did we have a causal relationship with that. I think organizations are getting to be in a much better place with people by being able to empathize. And sometimes, that's 90% of what anybody needs. (A7)

Further, they are perceived to be fair with all stakeholder groups and giving or charitable to worthy causes (A4, C1).

If we have a chance to make more money because somebody has a bigger budget, we'll take it. But that's not really an empathetic decision. You know, if we are still doing projects with, of the exact same output, with people with a smaller budget, being empathetic is being fair with all parties. And you know, working in his current economy, it is a struggle sometimes. It's not impossible but we never want to say that we are there. (A4)

When I think of empathetic, empathetic is also giving. Like you're a giving person, or you're a giving organization. So that jumps to mind. Giving and in tune and aware, I guess, is what I would say. (C1)

Several employees communicated their belief that an empathetic organization would prioritize social/environmental sustainability, making an effort to both understand and build for, or into, the social landscape (A10, A6, A8).

It's like, but they're making a commitment to being socially responsible not only to employees but to the community and environment. It all falls under that umbrella (A10)

So that, that philosophy of circular, is moving into business in the future. It's circular. And that's why people look to the supply chain. That's why companies even like Apple get attacked for child labor. So if you know your supply chain is clean, traceable, identifiable, and provable, there's a really good chance that everything that comes into your product and goes to consumers is circular. So that's sustainable. And that's identifiable, and that's what most people want. So many companies preach an internal message that is totally different from their external marketing message. And they ask their employees to live a lie. So this is not going to change overnight. (A6)

A good analogy for that is...a business called southern exposure construction where they build solar homes. So it's homes that essentially don't need a heat source and it's really, really neat...[They] look up the land first and build according to what exists, so it's to the shape of the land and that's what determines one story or two-story, window placements, Southern exposed windows, etc. So you have more heat from the sun and need less for the house. So he has an appreciation for not just taking a product and popping it onto a piece of land but respecting the two together, and then they kind of, as you put it on, it is dependent on, it's like our ideas that we have a context out there such that when I place a business on top of the social landscape, I'm actually really appreciating the context of that I'm dropping it into or building the business around. So as understanding landscape first and then building the business around that landscape. (A8)

This manifests as taking an interest in things that the community or organization surroundings are interested in and participating in sustainability initiatives and planning (B1). One participant suggested that without sustainability, organizations have a bleak future (A8).

I think an organization that was empathetic would be doing things like communicating out other things that affect the customers and talking about what we are doing for, for example, the

environment. Be sure that people understand about being energy efficient, understanding what community activities are going on or how we are helping the community and our reliability. (B1)

We are purpose driven organization. So the closest thing that I've seen that I could envision as being is just as organization where the business works, absolutely, where the profitable business and the product sells, in terms of the quality etc. But at the same time, the presence of sustainability is doing everything with a long-term view in an organization, so it's a sustainable business. Because if your supply chains aren't good, or you're acting in a way that's environmentally damaging, or as damaging to the communities herein, ultimately our belief is that business will be short-lived. So it's thinking more about the context you're building a business in, and to the people and societies that it touches in building a business. (A8)

Several participants supported that the establishment of empathetic culture is dependent upon the organization's structure (A12). Several participants provided examples of extant models they believed would support an empathetic culture. These included: B Corps. and other circular business models, triple bottom line companies, and purpose-driven organizations (A6, A8).

But again it really depends on the internal structure of how the organization is run. From the ground up. A lot of the time, with entrepreneurial businesses, they kind of learn on the fly. And the structure has to develop as they grow, because you may have a partner and then you hire another person and he can throw things off. (A12)

But now that I've been introduced to the B Corps and other people are adding acronyms to their pillars: people planet profit purpose and pleasure. Those are the two, the purpose and the pleasure, it's all those things. Why people work...It has to be a B Corp. There's no other structure. In Europe, they call it circular, the circular. The company with empathy toward. (A6)

We are purpose driven organization. So the closest thing that I've seen that I could envision as being is just as organization where the business works, absolutely, where the profitable business

and the product sells, in terms of the quality etc. But at the same time, the presence of sustainability is doing everything with a long-term view in an organization, so it's a sustainable business. (A8)

It was suggested by one participant that organizations are able to demonstrate their commitment to empathy through action, and that empathetic organizations actively look for ways to benefit the community (B3).

There's a lot of different needs and wants and us in the company, we can't solve everyone's issue, but we can let the community know what we're doing, here's what we're trying, to be part of the community, to be trying to be part of the city. To show them we do sponsor this, we do this, we do these charitable events and we are community. We do show things on social media and we are not hiding behind glass doors. (B3)

Another suggested that empathy can be established in terms of understanding other perspectives, but organizations have to go further into discussing those multiple views and ending up with actionable outcomes (A2). It was also stated that organizations actively learn from past mistakes, allowing for growth and organizational learning (A7).

So it's easy, I think it's one thing for people to be able to empathize with each other and understand and acknowledge, but there's another part of that equation in terms of – being like, okay, I'm willing to understand your point of view, I understand your thoughts or perspective, but we also have to move forward, we have to get things done. So we also have to know what the goal is. (A2)

We had a situation where one, somebody was close to us, was a potential client and had shock when they saw the quote and was kind enough to let us know that and it helped a couple of our people to enter into the scenario of perhaps a small business with a limited budget. And kind of, we can do better. Because if we come out with budgets that are okay for industry or maybe not for that small business, and maybe even making them embarrassed that they were so far off. But I

thought \$2000 and you've just quoted me 20, so I feel like an idiot. And so it helped us a little too, to appreciate sort of the situation of some clients that come to us. I think that's, that's what's important. (A7)

Several participants agreed that empathetic organizations are those that have a measurable impact, perform well on the business side, and remain practical, functioning organizations in addition to demonstrating empathetic behaviours (A4, A7, A9).

An empathetic organization also really performs well, but in ways that is not destructive but more additive. (A4)

I think it's probably really useful that whatever the opinions that you put out, that there is some way of showing that those opinions have been heard. (A7)

No I really like empathy. I really like critical thinking. I really like kindness. I think you both need to conform and work hard on all these things to create a practical, functioning organization. (A9)

Empathy, as observed by many participants, is perceived to be a leadership-driven, top-down function in the workplace (A11, A2, A12).

I guess someone in a leadership role understanding that, and, yeah, I feel like for a leader – and I'm not a leader in any way – but I feel like the leader needs to display empathy to people in different ways, so I guess reading people is important. (A11)

It's not a dictatorship. It's not just Greg at the top saying guys, this is what it is, do it. This is what I think...Yes, I mean, I think so. Greg has always been pushing for empathy and one step over the line of empathy a lot. He really has always been pushing for that for a long time, and it's very much on a personal level for him. So he's kind of pushed us to think more broadly. (A2)

I would say yes, Greg has certainly done some very, or internally they've done some very interesting documentaries and seemed very caring. They want to make change, but at the same time, they have to make money. So they do the social change documentaries and the word gets spread, and Greg is that spreading that word. So again that's where the separation happens between Greg's ideals and the reality of making money. That abrasion occurs, not in a bad way,

as an employee I still felt very passionate about the project that we did and I'm happy to see some of the changes they brought about our province. But again, at the same time, but flip that coin and I'm still working on projects that may not be as satisfying. But that's the reality of the job sometimes. (A12)

I think it's about the business model. That's what, if that's what they...I'm sure there are companies out there, other companies that help people, but I think it's really about what your business model is, what your strategic goals are, what your mission is, what you're about. If your mission is to sell the most cars, you might not want to work on a plan with somebody about that. Where ours is more about people and the community than it is the bottom line. (C2)

It requires a firm commitment to a culture of empathy from both organization personnel and policies (A7); commitments to empathy are informed by organization policies and values, positioned as essential to the organization.

Organizations? That's difficult because I think it all comes down to person-to-person. So who is the person representing? The organization has a policy that binds them, it can never say sorry, it can never empathize with the person. In hand ties you from the individuals and therefore can't be empathetic. I don't know that organizations can be. I think organizations can have policies that encourage or discourage empathy. And much depends on the person you're talking to. (A7)

It's like, but they're making a commitment to being socially responsible not only to employees but to the community and environment. It all falls under that umbrella. So right there, because it already made the stand to say that they're going to – because if you qualify to be a B Corp., you have to meet certain expectations. It's saying to me that they are going to have it written in their policies, their values. (A10)

This, as one participant observed, indicates that a leader's capacity for empathy needs to align with the organization's empathetic culture (A8, A3). Organizational leadership also engages in management listening, is open to new ideas and contributions, according to another (B2).

You know, I think where it starts off often is with the people in the organization itself and their capacity for empathy, particularly people's decision-making capability. So I think someone like Greg would be extremely high on the empathetic side of the scale, and in that kind of culture it works out. So I think the personal aspect of a person being or having those qualities to start off with. (A8)

I guess, well starting off with a good leader, someone you can trust and who allows you to explore your own will. Everybody gets along, it's a collaborative, creative group. So I think that all kind of fits into it. (A3)

Maybe some sense of, that you know management listening. So whether they have a 'ask the president' website that I've seen some company that or something that shows that they're paying attention to the concerns of the staff. Something like that. (B2)

The establishment of an empathetic culture is contingent on the organization making decisions based on love not greed (A4).

An empathetic organization will make appropriate decisions based on love not greed. And I think that sentence, that most, that says it all. If you are going to exploit people or cheat people, that's not a love decision that's a great decision. And also, an empathetic organization as a building block of a love economy – so that's an economy based on decision-making of caring, sustainability and empathy. (A4)

One participant did note, however, that support for an empathetic culture can be top-down or bottom-up (A1). Because organizations are comprised of people, their members can encourage and practice empathy, but the most an organization as an entity can do is encourage empathy through policies (A7).

I think, just what I said before about putting yourself in the shoes of another human being and thinking about how everybody's different. So having a broad spectrum of empathy as an organization. And support, whether it stems from executives or a grass roots movement of bringing in people who have that quality. (A1)

I haven't thought of that particular issue, because I would argue that an organization cannot empathize, an organization is a collective of contracts. An organization becomes a group of people and those individuals can or cannot be empathetic. So yeah, it's like any time you make a statement about the organization. So you can employ it as an organizational value but... (A7)

There was general agreement among participants that empathetic organizations are characterized by an ability to achieve healthy balance and symmetry with empathy, care for stakeholders and in their communications (A11).

You probably hear this a lot but, treat others as you would like to be treated. Obviously, so for me, being able to ask questions. So I guess being open. And trying to understand where the other person is coming from, even if that's not necessarily how you feel about it. (A11)

According to several participants, empathetic organizations are characterized by combined empathy and business interests (A5, B1); though there is a desire for empathy there, have to be boundaries and the organizations have to balance positive, open cultures with meeting business and productivity goals (A12, A10).

Well at the end of the day you do have a task. So I think, you know, like I just said, it isn't reason just stay home and take the day off if you have a bad morning, but I think you can be empathetic to the extent that you understand what people are going through. You can't necessarily shut down operations as a result of that. There's definitely a point where like okay, we got pull up our socks and get to work, but I get they are having a bad day. (A5)

To be empathetic as a person and empathetic as a business, you still have fact-based, you have to follow policies and procedures, you have to be sure that you're still following the rules of the road or of your business. (B1)

So as much as I want to believe that individuals value and needs are highly important, and they are, there still a need to function as a business and still need to function as an organization.

That's terrible. But yeah, so I see organizational empathy as a boss who can see and understand the situation, giving you a break when you need it by letting you take time off or making the senior executive call that preserves the business and the individual that may be involved. (A12)

In our you have a life when you leave here and they can be more empathetic over and missed deadlines, that sort of thing. I'm not saying that they don't, they're not relaxed, but at the same time they respect us to know what we need to do to get the work done without micromanaging and distrusting, like trusting that we know what to do. They trust that we know how to get the job done, they know we'll get it done when it needs to be done but at the same time you very much, they're not dictators. Life happens. (A10)

Further, organizations also need to consider balancing their empathy output with the empathy input they receive from their stakeholders as both a lack or an overabundance of empathy can be problematic for organizations, according to several participants (B2, A1, B4).

An empathetic person can be over-the-top if they want to, right to the point where there so into other people's business and caring that there just may be too much on one side ...See you can't be empathetic to the enth degree so that is affecting your operations negatively, so I don't think, I don't know, I don't think you can be entirely on one end of the scale or the other. You just have to have an element of it to have a happy workforce. (B2)

And I only say that, not that I don't respect the people, it's just that there's a difficulty to find a balance of people giving back to, and respecting, their workplace. There's a struggle to find the desire to work, and a balance. Because there's not so much structure here and it's hard to monitor whether people are doing the best work they can do. And that question is not brought up as much as making sure that that person is okay and understanding what they're going through. Life happens, things happen, but is there the same amount [of energy] from the organization going into making sure these people are doing good work to the best of their ability. (A1)

I think it's finding that middle ground of what empathy is, if you're trying to be empathetic on a large scale, you don't want to come across as, I think it's somewhere below middle ground is where you want to be. I think you can disengage individuals by being overly empathetic and you can certainly disengage if there's no empathy there. (B2)

In other words, while the organization invests and cares about others, there is a reciprocated emotional investment among an organization's members (A5).

I think it would look, I think in living it, it would look like an organization where the people who work there care about each other and ask each other what they're working on. You care about how the actions and words affect the people you work with and I think it positively impacts your working environment. (A5)

In addition, one participant stated, that organization membership actively balances its willingness to give feedback with willingness to receive feedback; they tend to feel that if they are buying into an organization, the organization should attempt to meet their needs (A9).

And just sort of having the ability to say, that was a bit harsh are you okay or letting it slide and waiting until things are better. Having the ability to do that is good, and it's also having the ability to take that sort of feedback. Greg and I are very receptive to this. We can drop our guard and just say what we need to one another. The emotions don't bother us but we are able to have a clear communication and disagree, argue, without hurting one another's feelings. At the end of the day we move forward, it's okay not to agree, I think the fallacy that most people don't understand. (A9)

A commitment to transparency, openness and diplomacy were perceived to be characteristics of empathetic organizations, as were personal, consistent communication efforts (A11, B3, A5, B4, B1).

Obviously, so for me, being able to ask questions. So I guess being open. And trying to understand where the other person is coming from, even if that's not necessarily how you feel about it. (A11)

I think an empathetic organization is an organization that communicates with its employees, its community and clearly has an understanding of what's going on in the community and what people need and what people want. There's a lot of different needs and wants and us in the company, we can't solve everyone's issue, but we can let the community know what we're doing. (B3)

I think having open honest communication is key. So we all know that people are human and people make mistakes. So if you don't have that open, honest communication then some people tend to hide their mistakes or withhold their mistakes. They don't want to admit them or their people are afraid they're going to integrate the relationship. I think having an open and honest communication policy helps foster just a better environment where people say, I messed up here, let's figure out how to work it. Let's fix it together. I think that would be the key. (A5)

I know, I think the transparency, the messages need to be timely, they need to be, as quickly as you can respond to a situation, they need to be relatively clear and factual. (B4)

I think an organization that was empathetic would be doing things like communicating out other things that affect the customers and talking about what we are doing for, for example, the environment. Be sure that people understand about being energy efficient, understanding what community activities are going on or how we are helping the community and our reliability, right. So those of the big ones. And I think we do that. And I think to be an empathetic company, you have to be really looking at it from the outside in. (B1)

Communications were described as being aligned with, or representative of, the organizations, and the tailoring messages and communications both to individuals and to mass audiences was perceived to be a sign of an empathetic organization (B1).

We want to have consistency and you want to be sure that you understand the whole story. So you do have to see it from a different, there is a different as a business, you do have to see it

differently. You have to see your roles and responsibilities as a business. Your ethics and those are your guiding principles as a business. So my guiding values and principles as a person, would be along the same lines as the business but it might be a little more personal. And when you're communicating from an empathy standpoint you do to stand behind what your company represents. (B1)

Communications in empathetic organizations serve to convey organizational goals and behaviours when engaging with stakeholders, and clear, consistent and honest communications were perceived to have the added benefit of facilitating productive environments (A9, A6, B3).

And just sort of having the ability to say, that was a bit harsh are you okay or letting it slide and waiting until things are better. Having the ability to do that is good, and it's also having the ability to take that sort of feedback. Greg and I are very receptive to this. We can drop our guard and just say what we need to one another. The emotions don't bother us but we are able to have a clear communication and disagree, argue, without hurting one another's feelings. At the end of the day we move forward, it's okay not to agree, I think the fallacy that most people don't understand. It's okay to disagree and to be flawed and to be different. It's okay. That acceptance is part of empathy I think. (A9)

So many companies preach an internal message that is totally different from their external marketing message. And they ask their employees to live a lie. So this is not going to change overnight. (A6)

I think an empathetic organization is an organization that communicates with its employees, its community and clearly has an understanding of what's going on in the community and what people need and what people want. There's a lot of different needs and wants and us in the company, we can't solve everyone's issue, but we can let the community know what we're doing, here's what we're trying, to be part of the community, to be trying to be part of the city. To show them we do sponsor this, we do this, we do these charitable events and we are community. We do

show things on social media and we are not hiding behind glass doors. We have an open-door policy, you know. Some of our staff of done several interviews, and there's a lot of things you can't be open about but there's a lot of things you can be truthful in communicating with your staff and with the public in a timely manner. (B3)

Several participants agreed that organizations should strive to be empathetic, and acknowledged that their organizations were driven to be perceived as empathetic (C1, A9); however, it was also emphasized that empathy is not the only contributing factor to a desirable organization (A2)

I do think an organization can be very empathetic. I think they should actually strive to be that way. (C1)

It's again, what we strive to be here (A9)

So I think the empathy is one part of it, but it's also, like there's other chunks that go along with that, because it can't just be like everyone understanding everyone else's opinion and talking it through. (A2)

Legitimacy of empathetic organization.

Participants were asked if they believed an organization could be truly empathetic. While the answers varied, there was some general agreement among participants that an empathetic organization exists when organizational people truly working towards a common goal; this involves engaging in debates with various points of view and establishing understanding of, or openness to, new ideas (A2, A7).

In the scenario I just described you are asking everyone around the table to be empathetic to everyone else's point of view, to have the ability to hear them out, take their idea and be able to either build on it or poke holes in it in a way that you're not attacking the person and that other people don't feel attacked. That's asking the entire organization to be able to have this ability of candor...To make our products better, to be able to have the ability to have non-personal, debates about our stuff and be able to understand other people's point of view. And that stems

from one of the most creative companies in the world, so it's pretty high bar. But it is really challenging, it's really tough to bring all those people around the table, especially when those people have different agendas. What do they want, what they personally want, what do they think the company wants? (A2)

Further, the organization must achieve a consistent balance of two-way, reciprocal empathy and the continued fulfillment of business goals (A1, A4).

There has to be a desire from an employee to be within an organization and help that organization move forward, rather than saying you need to work for me. I don't know, going back to balance, it has to be a 50/50. The employee has to be empathetic toward the organization, the brand or the corporation and right back to the employee. [Researcher: So more of a shared responsibility?] Yeah. (A1)

But I do believe we could actually see in our lifetime where an organization is truly empathetic. But with that, there has to be an analysis of how to price things as well. To make sure there is truly an equal value exchange for service product. We make profits based on receiving more money than it costs to make. That's totally fine as long as that extra money is agreeable as a fair value exchange to the person giving you the money. And that happens in business every day including ours. If we have a chance to make more money because somebody has a bigger budget, we'll take it. But that's not really an empathetic decision. You know, if we are still doing projects with, of the exact same output, with people with a smaller budget, being empathetic is being fair with all parties. (A4)

It was also suggested that, to be truly empathetic, organizations must be involved in the community, the local community particularly (B3).

To be truly empathetic. My Lord, that kind of a tough question. I'll ramble away but. I think to be truly empathetic, if the company did not participate in the community I don't think they could be a truly empathetic company. If they didn't do any community involvement, like if we sponsored stuff

that was in Toronto or Montréal, that doesn't make an empathetic company. They're just trying to rid of tax money. So if it's your own community, your own city, its monitoring community events, getting involved with like I say the homeless and the food bank and stuff, that's an empathetic company. (B3)

Participants identified constraints on organizational empathy, including: that organizations are only as empathetic as their individual members are capable of being (C2, A8); that organizations can acknowledging others' points of view while prioritizing business goals (B4, A2).

I think the organization is the sum of all the people. So sometimes you get people that come and work here and they just want a job, to pay the bills and usually those people don't, sometimes they will toe the line I guess and stay, but other times they don't want to get involved or, I don't want to say buy in – I'm not trying to sell a culture, but I think it's a good culture that we have. But I think, as I said, you're only as strong as your weakest team member (C2)

if you got a culture that is built around sort of empathy where you're looking at business and client relationships, looking at the context of where you build your business into, often comes back and rubs off on to other employees. So I think there's a number of people in our company that may not, may or may not have had much of an empathetic bend to them personally, but having worked for an organization like this, it shapes that. And I know certainly with myself, working closely with Greg for the past few years, it's changed me as a person and as a professional as well. (A8)

Benefits of implementing cultures of empathy.

Some participants agreed that standing as an empathetic organization can be beneficial, resulting in improved stakeholder relations with respect when things go wrong (B1, C1)

And it helps my role in communications because people already feel and value St. John energy being important and being empathetic. That really helps us with, if something bad happens, when

the power does go it for hours or in something really bad does happen, we are able to see that.

(B1)

I'd like us to be an empathetic organization and I think in a lot of ways we are but I think in a lot of ways we can improve. So I think it would cohesive, I feel it would make an organization more cohesive, more aware of your, of the individuals and the stakeholders involved. I think it would result in less problems for an association at well, because I feel it would be so in tune to everything that's going on that it would probably help in a lot of cases. (C1)

Several participants suggested potential benefits stemming from embracing cultures of empathy in organizations. One participant suggested empathetic organizations facilitate openness to new ideas and new solutions to problems (A2); another that workplace empathy positively impacts the work environment (A5).

And I think the benefit of the empathy is that everyone does get a chance at the table to feel comfortable enough to express their ideas and hopefully new ideas come to the surface and maybe it's a combination of a few that are the solution to the problem. And then everyone walks away feeling that they were heard, that they have the best possible idea and should do it, and that no one feels resentful when they leave. If everyone was heard, right. So that's my dream scenario. (A2)

You care about how the actions and words affect the people you work with and I think it positively impacts your working environment. (A5)

It was also suggested that empathetic organizations are more compelling to stakeholders, allowing for more brand personality, that the authenticity of their commitments is often apparent to audiences (A8).

Finally, it was observed that empathy in organizations can facilitate productivity (A12).

Yeah. I think probably, I think some of the most successful and longest lasting businesses are more compelling in the corporate culture, and I think particularly even more so now than ever before. I think we're seeing a really interesting shift to businesses, with the businesses are truly

empathetic at their core, there communicating to their customers or their partners more compellingly. It brings in much more the vivid brand personality. And if something I honestly just don't think you can fake. (A8)

So yeah, I imagine how I'm working right now, it's kind of freelance. I enjoyed the work environment. In a sense I imagine there's a hub where we are sort of able to go off and work on her own and come back and work in teams to get everything done. (A12)

Challenges of implementing cultures of empathy.

Many participants agreed that a culture of empathy can be difficult to maintain as an organization grows; easier to attain in a smaller organization, harder to protect if the company grows; easier to achieve empathetic culture in a smaller organization (A4, A9, A10, A11, A12, A11).

An empathetic organization first of all, would have a team that respects each other's values and place. And that's not easy. Especially as an organization grows, presuming. (A4)

It's again, what we strive to be here, you know we started off in a basement just a few of us. In doing that, we got to know all the hats and wear all hats. So we worked as one small group and all got to know each other in both the professional sense of the personal sense, and you tend to have a really good culture. As you grow, and expand, it sort of dilutes that a little bit. You didn't have that same history and empathy with one another as we did when we were smaller at the beginning. And we spent a lot of time and quite frankly a lot of money as well trying to preserve that and to make sure that in our culture, because we do believe that it's beneficial. (A9)

Because you know, they get it. They get the work life balance. They know that kid concerts happen every, every whatever it is, Easter, Christmas, so they know summer break is hard. So for me it's very important because I have three kids. So be able to go to an organization where they know that three kids can be crazy. That's huge for me. Because they are a small business, they

have a little bit more leeway in terms of deadlines. I guess. So if something major comes up, they don't necessarily think, okay, you're just going to automatically work overtime. (A10)

I want to say yes, and I think it's easier for the smaller organizations because you have a smaller number of people you need to keep happy. But I think when you get into the larger organizations where there are hundreds and thousands of employees it definitely gets more difficult and you can't display empathy towards everyone. (A11)

But again it really depends on the internal structure of how the organization is run. From the ground up. A lot of the time, with entrepreneurial businesses, they kind of learn on the fly. And the structure has to develop as they grow, because you may have a partner and then you hire another person and he can throw things off. (A12)

Another challenge to empathetic organizational legitimacy comes from reconciling large number of viewpoints and experiences; one participant suggested that the best interests of everyone involved will not always align (A10). This impacts the organization's ability to achieve a balance of two-way empathy, as the organization has to reconcile that different people in the organization may have different capacities for empathy (A1, A3, A10).

Truly empathetic. I don't know if they ever could because everyone because everybody has different opinions and different experiences. So something that might be good for me might not necessarily work for someone else. (A10)

But that's why it's important to nurture from both sides. I mean I'm working on it by taking a step away from being very involved in the organization. I'm working individually on trying to be a little more empathetic towards the organization to try and reach that balance, but it's like giving so much. It's like do you have the capacity to give as much as that other person? So a challenge that I would like to overcome is I would like to be okay with myself and the empathy I am giving, or either, as I said, trying to match. Or maybe it has to come down a little on the [organization]

side. I don't know. [Researcher: Do you think that could lead to employee burnout?] Yeah, maybe. It feels like there's a struggle to find a balance here. (A1)

Just a few personalities I guess. Maybe there are some people that are fitting into the culture of the company, are trying to balance. (A3)

One participant mentioned that it's asking a lot of the organization's people to engage in a strong empathetic culture; you need to take into account that people often have agendas of their own (A2, A8).

In addition, empathy can be stressful. It can be problematic to take on another's problems (A11).

But it is really challenging, it's really tough to bring all those people around the table, especially when those people have different agendas. What do they want, what they personally want, what do they think the company wants? (A2)

What's another big challenge, yeah, I think another big challenge is depending on where you are in the organization itself. If you're in a leadership role in the Company, or you are more in a technician capacity. So to give to extremes, if you got somebody who is in a management role in a company, they are seeing the entire organization, all of the challenges and they're looking at the organization seeing what kind of holes there are and the vision, and the purpose and so you are thinking about it in a very different way. And in that role I think it's easier to grasp thinking about being a purpose driven organization. But by contrast you have people who are maybe technicians where you might have an editor or shooter or a grip or something like that and their role is very focused, it's full still, and it's thinking. But it can be a bit more difficult for people in those roles to be able to think or understand that global perspective, no matter how much the organization tries to communicate. It's not that it's not achievable, but it seems to be a little more challenging and organizations. I don't know if that makes sense but it's hard to communicate it in a way that makes sense. (A8)

And I guess, coming from a person that would need to ask everyone how they were doing, it might put a lot on them as well, taking on everyone's problems. [Researcher: Being an empath can be very draining.] Yeah, I think so. (A11)

It can be difficult to empathize with stakeholders when things go wrong without unjustly accepting legal blame; this can be very effective in reducing tensions, especially compared to outright denial (A7).

Organizations that are listening to general trends on the one hand and organizations that are not afraid to take responsibility. This is my personal opinion. It's probably shifting, but there was a trend that companies could not admit any liability. Their legal team said no, sorry, we can't say sorry especially because it implies some sort of liability. And that's incredibly unfortunate for maybe a customer who feels that something went wrong, in a situation...But the fact is you are able, or your company is able, to not just brush it off with legal speak or newspeak. Just ask me a question and I'm going to respond with my message. It's very frustrating, and very cold hearted. And I think, it seems like both governments and corporations are able to get away with it. I'm not saying that I'm responsible for the pain or in some legal or financial way, but I can sure say that I'm very sorry you're in a situation or someone may say look, I'm injured here I can't work, and I can empathize with her situation. And we can get the point where we can say okay, did we have a causal relationship with that. I think organizations are getting to be in a much better place with people by being able to empathize. (A7)

Further, there can be costs, both financial and productivity-related, associated with adopting an empathetic organizational culture (A9, A12, A4, A11). Some participants felt that some employees would perceive empathetic cultures as permission to be less productive (A5).

There's a cost to investing in an empathetic culture. You give up, essentially time on work, time on productivity, time and a lot of other things that are equally important to the running of the organization. But at [Org. A] we do believe that empathy is important. it's a characteristic that we want. (A9)

So again that's where the separation happens between [the CEO's] ideals and the reality of making money. That abrasion occurs, not in a bad way, as an employee I still felt very passionate about the project that we did and I'm happy to see some of the changes they brought about our province. But again, at the same time, but flip that coin and I'm still working on projects that may not be as satisfying. But that's the reality of the job sometimes. (A12)

Economically it's going to take longer to grow. Financial success when you operate with integrity and honesty but I think in the longer term it's more sustainable. (A4)

Yes. I feel like it can be more time consuming and you may not always feel like you have the extra time on the employee side, or things like that. (A11)

I think the thing with empathy and empathetic organizations is that people may not take you necessarily seriously. I also feel like, because a moral code may not align with the vision of a business and the clients approaching you, you could have a loss of financial gain or contacts within the community. I also feel that empathy, not empathy but a positive work environment, is really hot right now. It's really cool to be a mover and shaker. But an organization the outside is just a shell of or with corporate reality underneath. So there is competition in that sense. (A12)

I think that lack of productivity. I think that that can come off as permission to be less productive. I don't necessarily see that in my organization, and I also think that leading by example is really important. (A5)

Many participants agreed that there is widespread uncertainty as to how to best cultivate empathetic cultures in organizations (C1). Further, once established, it requires constant maintenance (A9). Learning to be empathetic as an organization is a trial and error process and it takes time to get it right (A7).

I think, yeah, I think I answered that previously, but yeah, I do think an organization can be very empathetic. I think they should actually strive to be that way. I like the concept of it I guess. How you get there is a whole other issue, a can of worms. (C1)

Maybe you can become an empathetic organization, but you also have to work on it. You always have to maintain it. Maybe looking at it as, kind of like a three Michelin Star restaurant, you can attain that third star, but you need to maintain it, you need to constantly work at it and dedicate time to it...Yeah, I think I think some of us do. I think some of us could be more empathetic than others. I don't think we're going to align everyone on the same page, I think some of us are in different chapters. (A9)

I guess it's, too, within an organization you have to go through some trial and error of what does it mean to empathize, what language to use with people, when do your conversations go too far or not far enough. (A7)

Another challenge associated with empathetic organizations is achieving a balance of two-way empathy, reconciling the different people in the organization may have different capacities for empathy (A1).

But that's why it's important to nurture from both sides. I mean I'm working on it by taking a step away from being very involved in the organization. I'm working individually on trying to be a little more empathetic towards the organization to try and reach that balance, but it's like giving so much. It's like do you have the capacity to give as much as that other person? So a challenge that I would like to overcome is I would like to be okay with myself and the empathy I am giving, or either, as I said, trying to match. Or maybe it has to come down a little on the [organization] side. I don't know. [Researcher: Do you think that could lead to employee burnout?] Yeah, maybe. It feels like there's a struggle to find a balance here. (A1)

Yet another challenge of empathetic organizations lies in attempting to expose or explain to non-management employees the big picture rationale for adopting a particular set of beliefs or culture in an organization (A8).

I think one of the big challenges you run into is exposure of employees. [the CEO] and ...will go to the B Corp. champions trade, which is usually a North American event, it was in New Jersey

this last year. And you can go to that event and you can be around all of these purpose driven organizations and really envision the context. But the employees aren't with you, and you can only afford to send one or two at a time. So being able to come back and communicate that is always a challenge. (A8)

The trendiness of positive organizational cultures at present can make it difficult to judge the authenticity of an organization trying to be empathetic (A12). According to one participant, this can be overcome by organizational consistency, and internal and external messaging that align (A6).

I think the thing with empathy and empathetic organizations is that people may not take you necessarily seriously. I also feel like, because a moral code may not align with the vision of a business and the clients approaching you, you could have a loss of financial gain or contacts within the community. I also feel that empathy, not empathy but a positive work environment, is really hot right now. It's really cool to be a mover and shaker. But an organization the outside is just a shell of or with corporate reality underneath. (A12)

You can spot a lie in so many companies doing what you call greenwashing. The staff inside know that they're not telling the truth, but the marketing department says this is the only way were going to sell this crap. To green wash it and pretend. (A6)

Organizational empathy vs. personal empathy.

There seemed to be general agreement among participants that an organization's capacity to be empathetic was based on the capacity of its people to show empathy (A8, A7, C2).

You know, I think where it starts off often is with the people in the organization itself and their capacity for empathy, particularly people's decision-making capability. So I think someone like Greg would be extremely high on the empathetic side of the scale, and in that kind of culture it works out. So I think the personal aspect of a person being or having those qualities to start off with. I think the other answer's that as well, sometimes an organization, if you got a culture that is built around sort of empathy where you're looking at business and client relationships, looking

at the context of where you build your business into, often comes back and rubs off on to other employees. (A8)

Organizations? That's difficult because I think it all comes down to person-to-person. So who is the person representing? The organization has a policy that binds them, it can never say sorry, it can never empathize with the person. In hand ties you from the individuals and therefore can't be empathetic. (A7)

I think the organization is the sum of all the people. So sometimes you get people that come and work here and they just want a job, to pay the bills and usually those people don't, sometimes they will toe the line I guess and stay, but other times they don't want to get involved or, I don't want to say buy in – I'm not trying to sell a culture, but I think it's a good culture that we have. But I think, as I said, you're only as strong as your weakest team member. (C2)

While these participants felt empathy was inherently human, they did note some differences in how empathy functions in personal contexts, compared to professional contexts. It was suggested that personal empathy is less complex and that individuals have more freedom than organizations to be empathetic; an organization is more constrained, having to operate according to rules and guidelines (B2) (B3) (B4).

It has to marry balanced, empathetic and business functions, and constantly differentiate between its very stakeholders and understand how it's impacting community (A12) (A10).

While again I think that an organization has people that it has to report to as opposed to a person, it's just one person right. It's kind of a hard question. An empathetic person can be over-the-top if they want to, right to the point where there so into other people's business and caring that they're just may be too much on one side. I don't know. That's a tough question. (B2)

Someone at work, may not be empathetic at work, but outside the work, they're very empathetic. They know when they come to work they have a job to do. There are rules and guidelines they have to operate within, and they try to do their best to operate within the guidelines. (B3)

I think you can be much more empathetic as a person than you can as an organization. I think as a person, you can deal directly with, you can tailor your communication and empathy, whereas an organization has to be much broader on the empathic message. (B4)

So as much as I want to believe that individuals value and needs are highly important, and they are, there still a need to function as a business and still need to function as an organization.

(A12)

Well I guess, like an empathetic person, they're always going to be empathetic towards other people, no matter what situation. An empathetic organization kind of looks at not only their employees but how they are impacting their clients their coworkers, the community. I think it's a big thing. Their environment, going green, recycling, that sort of thing. By caring about how your organization impacts the world. (A10)

Organizations tend to have greater support for empathy: greater resources, human and financial, that impact organizational culture; and, greater collaboration and organization (A3) (A8)

I guess when you're one person, it's harder. With a company you got lots of people. (A3)

Good question. I think an empathetic organization functions differently in the sense that they are, there is a larger opportunity to be an influence in society then an individual in the sense that as an organization, you have a select pool of resources, finances and you have a team of individuals. An individual can do amazing things, but when efforts are coordinated as a team, you bring a lot more to the table, a lot more context about where you're at. It's the difference between a lot of people doing disjointed efforts as opposed to 200 people coming together pulling finances resources and expertise in social capital to achieve a common social cause. That's probably one of the big differences is that collaboration and organization of resources. And that also is the ability to be able to generate funds or capital to be able to help in different situations as well. So

we can have all the intentions that we want, but if you can't generate capital and you can't allocate time to solve those problems, that stops the intentions. (A8)

Categorizing Themes

Figures 2 through 4 illustrate how each of the central themes identified in the open and axial coding stages were related to one another, such that an overarching or core category was identified as the central theme of the for each section of research. The core category has been defined as “the main theme or phenomenon of the study, while the basic social process or whatever the process is can be found embedded in that main theme” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 266). Figure 2 demonstrates that empathy can be understood as a multidimensional construct, encompassing comprehension of others’ experiences, socio-cultural aspects, strategic aspects, and communicative elements. Empathy, in an organizational context, is thereby defined as the act of attempting to comprehend the experiences, thoughts and emotions, of others for social, strategic or communicative purposes. Selective coding, following the emergence of the core category, affirmed that this definition logically pulls the central themes of the section together, forming a consistent explanation of the whole, and accounting for the variation within those categories. Figure 3 presents the central emergent themes from the exploration of empathy’s relationship to opinion leadership; these include the impact of empathy on organizations and situational dependence. The overarching principle, supported by selective coding, suggests empathy is perceived to positively impact opinion leadership of organizations, though the extent of its influence is context dependent. Figure 4 presents thematic findings related to empathetic organizations, which include a set of defining characteristics, questions of legitimacy, the benefits and challenges associated with empathetic cultures, and differentiating qualities of organizational empathy. Thus, empathetic organizations are defined as organizations that make an effort to foster two-way empathetic relationships and communications with their stakeholders, while at the same time prioritizing business goals and productivity. Selective coding affirmed that this definition accounts for the underlying logic, consistency and variation within the data.

Grounded Theory Emergence

Taking these three conclusions together, a grounded theory emerges from the data, stating: organizations may be considered empathetic if they make an effort to comprehend the experiences, thoughts and emotions of their stakeholders while still meeting business goals; empathy in organizations has social, strategic and communicative functions, and it is perceived to positively impact opinion leadership of organizations.

Additional Insights

1) Communication Landscapes of Participant Organizations

Each interview participant was asked to describe their organization's communication landscape. Figure 5 summarizes the range of priority mediums identified by participants for each organization. A reliance on email and online social platforms was observed across all participant organizations, and electronically-mediated communication channels seemed to dominate each of the organizations' communication behaviours. Face-to-face encounters, however, were highlighted by members of Organizations A and C as very important to organizational communications.

2) Building Positive Relationships with Stakeholders

Interview participants were asked to list what they considered to be the most important aspects of building positive relationships with stakeholders, both internal and external to the organization. As this question was not directly related to empathy or opinion leadership, it was not included in the grounded theory analysis. However, several themes did emerge when the responses were coded. These include: developing strong communication and relationship ties; developing a knowledge of the audience; possession of specific organizational characteristics (accountability, patience, authenticity, collaboration, openness and transparency); and possession of empathetic characteristics (simultaneously caring and meeting business needs). Figure 6 presents a visual representation of these findings.

3) Personal Empathy Anecdotes

Finally, every interview participant was provided the opportunity to relate an experience where their organization had shown itself to be particularly empathetic. This allowed for participants to provide

concrete examples of empathy that aligned with their perceptions of this phenomenon. Each participant contributed and excerpts from 5 participants are presented below:

An illustration, we have three kinds of projects that we get. There's the we don't do it jobs, there's the good work good companies stuff, and then there's the high purpose companies we work with. So if we don't do it, those are projects where we don't feel there's a value. So the company came to us and said hey we want you to help us market more petroleum, we would probably say no to that. Or, there was a project a few years ago where the organization was known, quite positively, to distribute funds to non-profit organizations; when the team actually went to complete this project and they saw the addiction and kind of the darkness there, they just said no, and we said no, we're not doing that work anymore. So there are certain things that, maybe are not a good business decision, but we don't do straight up. And in the middle category is just good as mainline businesses that are doing good works, they're good companies, with reasonable cultures, and it's just kind of like a good marketing video and stuff like that. We'll do it. And the third is that, we often, and this is happening more and more, work with businesses that have the same kind of social purpose or activism bents to them as we do. And for us to be able to do work with them is extremely meaningful. And so, we often say we will do the limbo to try and make those projects work for the clients. So there's a company that were doing work with right now that's, they're based in Europe and they make water bottles, reusable water bottles, which are huge in Europe and they're doing a New York launch, a United States launch. And it's one of those things, whether the budget is slim or not, we're just going to be extremely flexible to try and work with them. Because they are, we believe they are, authentic and geared towards, I mean, its focus is against pollution in the ocean. They have a mission and they are very focused around that. And they have a business built around it as well, so we tried very hard to support them, whether it's profitable or not. (A8)

Our organization? I mean I think there are little things here and there that we do. You know we are empathetic to different causes. We thought of this idea of creating a Saint John Stock Bank of footage and the impetus of that was that there were a lot of not-for-profit and charities in Saint John and they all kind of require video, and we do a lot of video, but there's this thing where they can't really afford us, being a not for profit. And that's fine. And it's difficult for us to do all of this even though we want to do it, but it really elevates the costs doing that when they're not paying. So we came up with this idea where we wanted to create a stock bank of footage so that we wouldn't have to keep doing these things and we would provide the footage to those organizations for free. Then we thought, why don't we take a step further and why don't we allow anyone to have access to it and be very clear about, if you want to use it and if you have a budget please feel free to donate what you like. And then we were like, we don't want the money, it's not for us. That's not the point. So we decided to use charity of choice. For example, the Learning Exchange. So any agency, or school that wanted to access the footage and had money but not enough to hire us, they could donate 50 bucks on the site have all this access to all the footage we put up. We got a few things from that, we wanted to be able to show Saint John in the light that we see it. To see it through the eye, through the lens, where we see a lot of beauty in it. We also want to solve the problem of, to help solve the problem, of charities and developing non-profits, so that they can access high-quality footage and tell the stories that they need to tell. And thirdly, the financial component which is gathering all the money and giving it to the Learning Exchange. So that is, in my opinion, sort of the way of how our organization has acted with empathy towards a series of objectives. (A9)

So we have many examples of, you know, where you get a single mom on Twitter who says I need to know when the powers coming back on because I have a baby here for getting cold. So we communicate one-on-one with a lot of people. We do have customer service reps, we do have people to answer the phone to talk to our customers. We even have an office here where you can

actually come in and talk to somebody to pay your bill or to set up new services. Or things like that. Like we have a reception area here for customers to come in and talk to us. Which is, it's sort of different. A lot of people just pay their bills online; you don't see that human touch component. We still offer quite a bit of that human touch component to our customers, which I think is very huge and very empathetic. You know, you're able to talk to someone face-to-face. And we still do quite a bit of that even through social media, because we still have a small area and a small following. We are still able to talk to people one on one through social media for example. So that's a huge piece that may change over time as our social media and communication plan becomes larger, but right now were able to manage, really to provide a really one-on-one touch to our customers, for the ones that need it. Not a huge percentage of people do, we do have an aging population here in St. John and we do have a huge poverty issue. So we have a dynamic that's very different than say, for example, other utilities. So we really gear to that and I think that piece on the outage piece or for example, just providing information to people is really helpful. And then the other piece is the community. So we do a lot, we have over 2000 hours that employees volunteer within the St. John community and we do send quite a bit of money trying to, for example reduce poverty within, generational poverty within children. So we do a lot. And you know I think that really shows and we have a whole bunch of employees for example that are doing the hike for hospice. And we communicate that very well over social media, but it's that extra touch. We are very lucky. We are very, very lucky because of our size and the area that we live in. Like you know, the fact that we all live here. Or most of us do. There are a couple of us who live in Quispam and other surrounding areas, but we're here every day. And it's, because in such an old business, as you know around 1922, there is a lot of generations of people that are here. So you might have a great grandpa or grandpa that actually worked here. So it's almost a small type of business environment and a family environment. That really helps us with that empathy piece. (B1)

The events that always come to mind are the power outage ones. So those are the ones that we've done well with, the same with the events we've been poor at. So, in recent years, we've done much, much better at – a few years back, I actually remember a time when people would call in and say the power was out and the response would be 'do you understand that your power isn't guaranteed'? that would be the response that people would have, and absolutely a horrible response. So since those days, that was probably in the ice storm in '99, so that was a huge event for us, with thousands of customers out, and I think it had gotten to a point where, after two or three days of the power being out, probably tempers were starting to rise and patience was wearing thin and empathy was the first hit on that. But in recent years with power outages, we seem to get ahead of that more often. We're much more empathetic and we're being more timely in our communications, we're being transparent and being quicker getting a response out. I think it's those power outages for us, that gives us a chance to showcase it. (B4)

When I think of the Y, I think of the past year and all the newcomers we've welcomed to Saint John, the refugees. It's been huge and it's been an effort with staff and with volunteers in the community. I don't think you could get – it's empathy throughout and that's why people became involved, because of their empathy towards these people and what they could do to help. And the Y is open to everyone, so that's one of our, that's the best thing about the Y really. We deal with situations everyday of people coming in, they want to be, the children want to have swimming lessons, they can't afford to do it, so we help them out. So our staff are dealing with that all the time. So yeah, I think empathy is huge at the Y. I mean we're a charity and we're open to everyone so it's gotta be. (C1)

I have, well I had a phone call from someone the other day and they had a child in the program that has severe special needs and he's continuing to deteriorate and so it's been very hard on the family to the point where parents have been coming in crying every day and they're not sure – sometimes it gets to the point where we're not sure how long he'll live – but also how stressful it

is on them and their relationship. So the staff talked about it, and this is a staff where one is fulltime and the rest of them are all part time, you know, university staff, and they all pitched in money and got enough together to buy two movie passes and gift cards to go out for dinner. So they called them and said we're going to watch your child, there's four of us at the centre, so we want you to come and say hi to him and then go out for dinner, we want you to have the time to go out and do this. And so she was crying on the other end of the phone. So those are the type of people that we work with, and those are the kind of things, they can see the situation that she's in and how much, how hard it is on them with it being part of their daily life. So they were able to give them 3 hours of time to themselves. So those kinds of things happen all the time, so it's nice...You know what, if you sat down and met with every single one of my supervisors they would probably be able to give you ten stories like that. For me, I'm removed where I'm not directly dealing with the kids, but I was just talking to her and she told me the story and it just chokes me up thinking about it. Like I know who the family is and you form bonds with people. You're with some of these people. In some instances, it's just going in and purchasing something from someone and leaving and you're done, but with us we care about people's kids from the time that they're one until they're twelve. And you run into them at the mall – I had someone come up to me, I was at the Ale House in the summer and he's like 'Adrienne, how are you? It's me Sam' and I'm like gosh, you were 7 the last time I saw you and now you're serving at a restaurant. Like I've been here way to long. But they remember you and that's cool. (C2)

Quantitative Results and Interpretation

Participant Profile

The survey was developed and distributed electronically through email invitations to internal stakeholders by the participant organizations on March 22, 2017. Over a 3-week period, data was collected in accordance with University Research Ethics Board policies. Overall, 29 complete survey responses were obtained and the overall response rate was 9.2%. Each of the participant organizations were represented in this sample: Organization A, a media production company (13.8%); Organization B, an energy and utility service provider (58.6%); and Organization C, a member and volunteer-based charity (27.6%). Of the survey participants, 35.7% identified as male, 53.7% identified as female and 10.7% identified as neither. Participant age ranged from 21 to over 60 years of age, though 50% identified as being between 21-45 years of age, and 17.9% of participants did not disclose their age. Participants' duration of employment with their respective organizations varied from one to 20 years, though 37% of participants had been employed with their current organization for 1-5 years. Participants held a variety of roles in their organizations, as 6.9% identified as a manager, director or VP; 24.1% were supervisors; 17.2% identified as technical workers; 6.9% were casual workers, and 44.8% held other titles. Figure 7 presents a graphical illustration of the participant profile.

Perceived Empathy and Opinion Leadership Scales

In line with Hinkin, Tracey & Enz (1997), analysis of the two measurement instruments, the *Perceived Empathy in Organizational Communications* (PEOC) and *Perceived Opinion Leadership in Organizational Communications* (POLOC) scales, began with calculating internal reliability and factor loading. While there has been significant debate with respect to the minimum sample size required to appropriately conduct these statistical tests, the total of 29 completed responses obtained in this study falls below commonly accepted sample sizes (Hinkin et al., 1997). The decision to proceed with the tests was undertaken with the knowledge that the results would not be generalizable and, that the likelihood of attaining statistical significance would increase with a larger sample size. As the two scales measure

different concepts, the Cronbach's Alpha and Exploratory Factor Analysis for each were calculated independently, with results presented in Table 2.

The factor loading for each item was computed, resulting in the emergence of four factors in the PEOC scale (care and compassion; demonstrable actions; awareness of others and advocacy; two-way engagement) and three factors in the POLOC scale (quality of communication; degree of influence; audience engagement). The Cronbach's Alpha value for both the PEOC scale (0.915) and POLOC scale (0.904) were excellent. Had these values been achieved with a minimum sample of 100, the scales would be considered reliable instruments; however, these remain encouraging values for future testing (Hinkin et al., 1997).

Exploratory factor analysis findings.

The PEOC was a 14-item scale developed to measure perceived empathy in organizations. It used a 7-point Likert format ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' The dimensionality of the 14 items was analysed using an exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation. Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) was calculated (0.65). Its value, though adequate for sampling, was below 0.80, indicating the findings may not be generalizable. Principle component analysis revealed four factors which were subsequently named: 1) Care and Compassion; 2) Demonstrable Action; 3) Awareness of Others and Advocacy; and, 4) Two-Way Engagement (Figure 8). Factor 1 was a strong primary factor, accounting for 48.8% of the total variance, while factors 2 (10.2%), 3 (9.6%), and 4 (7.5%) were much less significant. The POLOC was a 14-item scale developed to measure perceived opinion leadership in organizations. Like the PEOC, it used a 7-point Likert format ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' The dimensionality of the 14 items was analysed using an exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation. Kaiser's measure of sampling adequacy (MSA) was calculated (0.73). Its value, though adequate for sampling, was below 0.80, indicating the findings may not be generalizable. Principle component analysis revealed three factors which were subsequently named: 1) Quality of Communication; 2) Degree of Influence; and, 3) Audience Engagement (Figure 9). Factor 1 was a strong

primary factor, accounting for 50.4% of the total variance, while factors 2 (13.4%) and 3 (8.5%) were much less significant. Figures 8 and 9 present the factor groupings of both the PEOC and POLOC scales.

Participant Overall Scale Results

The following table (Table 3) provides the mean values for each the PEOC and POLOC scales attained by each participant organization, as well as the overall values. These mean ‘scores’ range in value from 1-7, as survey participants were asked to approximate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale. The higher the value, the stronger the level of agreement. Organization A, a for-profit media production company and B Corporation, obtained higher values in both PEOC (6.13) and POLOC (5.84) scale means. Figure 10 provides a visual interpretation of the data in Table 3.

Perceived Empathy Scale Items

The following table (Table 4) provides the mean values for each scale item comprising the PEOC scale for each participant organization, as well as the overall values. Organization A, a for-profit media production company and B Corporation, had the highest mean value for 8 of the 14 items. Organization C, a member and volunteer-based charity, obtained higher values in 6 of the 14 items. Figure 11 provides a visual interpretation of the data in Table 4.

Perceived Opinion Leadership Scale Items

The following table (Table 5) provides the mean values for each scale item comprising the POLOC scale for each participant organization, as well as the overall values. Organization A, a for-profit media production company and B Corporation, had the highest mean value for 11 of the 14 items. Organization B, an energy and utility service provider, had the highest mean value for 1 of the 14 items. Organization C, a member and volunteer-based charity, obtained higher values in 3 of the 14 items. Figure 12 provides a visual interpretation of the data in Table 5.

Impact of Age, Gender, Role and Employment Duration

The mean ‘scores’ for the PEOC and POLOC scales were calculated based on the avowed ages of the survey participants. This data is presented in Table 6. The highest PEOC mean value was obtained by

participants aged 21-35 (6.21), while the lowest mean value was obtained by participants in the 55-60 age group (4.50). The highest POLOC mean value was obtained by participants aged over 60 (6.21), while the second lowest mean value was obtained by participants in the 55-60 age group (4.42)¹.

The mean 'scores' for the PEOC and POLOC scales were calculated based on the preferred gender of the survey participants. This data is presented in Table 7. The highest PEOC mean value was obtained by male participants (5.66). The highest POLOC mean value was obtained by female participants (5.35).

The mean 'scores' for the PEOC and POLOC scales were calculated based on the organizational role of the survey participants. This data is presented in Table 8. The highest PEOC and POLOC mean values were both obtained by participants that identified as a Manager, Director or VP of the organization (5.93 and 5.68, respectively). The lowest PEOC mean value was obtained by participants that identified as technical workers (4.59) and the lowest POLOC mean value was obtained by participants that identified as casual workers (4.68).

The mean 'scores' for the PEOC and POLOC scales were calculated based on the participants' duration of employment with the organization. This data is presented in Table 9. The highest PEOC mean value was obtained by participants who had been with the organization for 1-10 years (5.76), while the lowest mean value was obtained by participants with an employment duration of 11-15 years (4.90). The highest POLOC mean value was obtained by participants who had been with the organization for 6-10 years (5.56), while the lowest mean value was obtained by participants with an employment duration of more than 20 years (4.74).

Empathy Factor Questions

In addition to the PEOC and POLOC scale items, and demographic questions, an additional ten questions were devised based on findings from the qualitative interview component of the study. Interview participants suggested a number of factors were related to empathy and opinion leadership,

¹ The lowest POLOC mean value was obtained by participants who abstained from revealing their age.

including trust, respect, patience and employment satisfaction. Further, interview participants remarked on the legitimacy and desirability of organizational empathy. Table 10 lists these questions and provides the mean values for each participant organization, as well as the overall mean values. These mean 'scores' range in value from 1-7, as survey participants were asked to approximate their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale. The higher the value, the stronger the level of agreement. Organization A, a for-profit media production company and B Corporation, had the highest mean value for 9 of the 10 items. Organization C, a member and volunteer-based charity, obtained higher values in 1 of the 10 items. Figure 13 provides a visual interpretation of the data in Table 10.

Best and Worst Performing Survey Items

Table 11 summarizes the 5 highest and 5 lowest scoring survey items for all survey participants. Participants were least likely to agree that their organizations were providers of advice, rather than dependent on advice (3.83); that workplace empathy and personal empathy are the same thing (3.86); that their organization shares content on social media that stands up for people that are being taken advantage of (4.04); that their organization often shares its opinion/viewpoints on relevant issues via social media/Internet/email (4.43); and, that they look to their organization as a source of advice, not just direction (4.45). Participants were most likely to agree that their organization cares about them (5.96); their organization trusts them (5.97); they respect their organization (5.97); that their organization supports, campaigns for, or advocates charitable causes in its online communications (6.03); and, that their organization is charitable (6.41).

Significant Correlations

Two-tailed Pearson Correlations were calculated to determine whether statistically significant relationships existed between the PEOC and POLOC scales. Further, I was interested in whether significant relationships existed between the empathy and opinion leadership and the empathy factors, as had been implied by interview participants. All significant correlations are presented in Table 12. A statistically significant, positive correlation (.838) was found to relate the PEOC and POLOC scales.

Statistically significant, positive correlations (ranging from .560-.819) were found to relate the PEOC scale to symmetrical trust, respect, and patience; statistically significant, positive correlations (ranging from .510-.729) were found to relate the POLOC scale to symmetrical trust, respect, and patience. For each empathy factor, the correlation with the PEOC scale was stronger than with the POLOC scale. The PEOC scale was also significantly and positively correlated with the belief that an organization can be truly empathetic (.560). Both the PEOC and POLOC scales were significantly and positively correlated with job satisfaction (.755 and .645, respectively).

In addition to their relationship to the empathy and opinion leadership scales, the relationships between the empathy factor questions was explored. All statistically significant correlations larger than .775 are presented in Table 13 and indicate that the various empathy factors are closely, though not causally, related.

Path Analysis

A path analysis was conducted to explore potential causal relationships among the measured variables included in the quantitative survey, including empathy (PEOC), opinion leadership (POLOC), mutual trust (I trust my organization; My organization trusts me), mutual respect (I respect my organization; My organization respects me), mutual patience (I am patient with my organization; My organization is patient with me), and openness to empathy (I believe an organization can be truly empathetic; I would like to work for an empathetic organization). An initial model was created (Figure 14), which was consistent with the empirical data and all but two pathways were identified as significant, with all calculated Pearson product-moments greater than 0.05.

The resultant model (Figure 15) had a Chi square value of 4.1 and p value of 0.383, indicating there was no significant difference between the ideal and empirically tested models. NFI, TL1 and CFI values were all larger than 0.90 (0.974, 0.996, 0.999, respectively), signifying good model fit. The calculated RMSEA value was less than 0.05 (0.030).

Presentation of Open Response Survey Items

Prior to submitting the survey, participants were given the opportunity to respond to two open-ended questions: “What can your employer or supervisor do to be more empathetic”; and, “Could you describe any online interactions you have, or communications you receive, from your employer?” These questions served to identify any potential areas for development in organizations aiming to be more empathetic, and to give a sense of participant immersion in organizational communications. Participant responses are provided in Figure 16.

Discussion

This research project was undertaken with the intent to: define empathy in a communication context; identify role of empathy in organizational communications and the relationship between empathy and opinion leadership; develop an instrument to measure perceived empathy and opinion leadership in organizations; and, test this instrument with organizations to determine reliability and validity. Three research questions were developed to guide the research toward satisfying these objectives: (1) How is empathy defined in a professional communication context? (2) What is the role of empathy in organizational communications? (3) To what extent are organizations that are perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders also perceived to be opinion leaders by their internal stakeholders? By means of an exploratory, sequential mixed methods study comprised of qualitative interviews and a quantitative survey, it is my belief that these questions were addressed and insights gleaned may aid organizations in refining their communication practices and optimizing the communication channels available.

RQ1 How is empathy defined in a professional communication context?

Empathy, in an organizational context, is the attempt to comprehend the experiences, thoughts and emotions, of others for social, strategic or communicative purposes.

The first question “How is empathy defined in a professional communication context?” was addressed through a survey of academic literature focusing on empathy in a variety of disciplines, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with participant organization leaders and subject matter experts. The academic literature revealed a gap in knowledge pertaining to empathy in an organizational communication context, even though empathy has been thoroughly addressed in multiple fields including biology, psychology, medicine, social work and philosophy. Further, there is no consensual definition of empathy across academic disciplines (Coplan, 2011; Elliot et al., 2011; Fagiano, 2016). Historically, empathy has been conceptualized as an ability, capacity, skill, process of identity construction or a situation-specific state (Elliot et al., 2011; Gerdes et al., 2010). Coplan (2011) advocated for a narrow conceptualization of empathy comprising emotional contagion, pseudo-empathy and empathy proper, and

argued that broad conceptualizations lead scholars to ignore or conflate differences among empathetic processes. Fagiano (2016) countered Coplan, arguing that a narrow view of empathy would lead to a narrowing of the empathetic phenomena and experiences; further, he called for a pluralistic definition of empathy, which would remain relevant throughout the variety of contexts in which empathy occurs. There is also significant debate surrounding the extent to which empathy is emotional and/or rational in nature. Early writings on empathy tend to focus on the emotional experience of “feeling into” the thoughts or experiences of others (Herder, 1774; Kohut, 1959). In the mid to late 20th century, the discourse grew to include the rational characteristics of empathy, such as cognitive processing (Gerdes et al. 2010; Levinson and Reuf, 1992).

Grounded theory analysis of the 18 in-depth interviews revealed key insights which I believe provide some clarification for these discrepancies in the literature. Firstly, the analysis resulted in an emergent definition of empathy in an organizational context. Empathy, in this context, is the attempt to comprehend the experiences, thoughts and emotions, of others for social, strategic or communicative purposes. This definition invokes Levinson and Reuf’s (1992) three qualities of empathy: knowing (cognitively) what a person is feeling; feeling (affect) what another is feeling; and responding compassionately. It also closely resembles Elliot et al.’s (2011) assessment of empathy as a higher-order category under which different behaviors may be found, including empathetic rapport (adopting a compassionate attitude, demonstrating understanding), communicative attunement (staying attuned to the communications and experiences of others), and person empathy (demonstrating understanding of others’ experiences and motivations both presently and historically). The broad conceptualization supports Fagiano’s (2016) claim that definitions of empathy should be broad enough to account for the diverse situations in which empathy occurs; however, it is also important to note that the definition is specific to a certain field (organizational communications) allowing for scholarly appreciation of the nuances associated with the empathetic experiences in organizations (Coplan, 2011).

The definition encompasses the four distinct dimensions of empathy uncovered during analysis, including: Comprehension of Others' Experiences; Socio-Cultural Aspects of Empathy; Strategic Aspects of Empathy; and, Communicative Role.

Comprehension of others' experiences.

This dimension is characterized by: the range of conceptualizations of empathy provided by participants, including empathy as an ability, a personality trait, a by-product of intelligence and a business tool; the shared view of empathy as a self-orientated experience with inherent limitations (associated with perspective-taking); empathy as having both emotional and cognitive components; and, empathy as eliciting a physical response from those experiencing it.

Socio-cultural aspects of empathy.

Empathy is generally perceived as being non-universal and occurring disproportionately among individuals; it is inherently social and serves cultural functions, such as being a vehicle for showing care, or facilitating conflict resolution. It is viewed as situation and context-dependent, and a burden if applied or practiced indiscriminately.

Strategic aspects of empathy.

Participants viewed empathy as strategic and often actionable, allowing for individuals to anticipate how others will behave in a particular situation and adapt their behaviors accordingly; it also may aid in facilitating openness and mitigating conflict. Several interview participants described empathy using language to indicate value, likening empathy to a resource.

Communicative role.

Participants largely agreed that empathy plays a significant role in communication, influencing clarity and effectiveness of messages. Achieving two-way, or symmetrical empathy was highlighted as being a worthy goal of empathetic organizational communications.

The qualitative analysis was also successful in defining the “empathetic organization”, a term used to describe organizations which adopt cultures of empathy. According to study findings, empathetic organizations try to foster reciprocal empathetic relationships and communications with their stakeholders while, at the same time prioritizing business goals and productivity.

In the quantitative component of this study, factor analysis of the PEOC revealed four distinct factors associated with the perception of empathy in organizations: 1) Care and Compassion; 2) Demonstrable Action; 3) Awareness of Others and Advocacy; and, 4) Two-Way Engagement. The relevance of finding four largely complimentary components (subthemes or factors) of empathy in both the qualitative and quantitative sections of this study is noted, and this serves to support the pluralistic, yet focussed proposed definition of empathy in an organizational communication context.

RQ2 What is the role of empathy in organizational communications?

Empathy has social, strategic and communicative functions.

The second research question “What is the role of empathy in organizational communications?” was also addressed in the qualitative interviews phase. In the literature, Zhao et al. (2015) argue that empathy’s role in communication is important as publics rely on their communities, online and offline, for social support as well as information. Empathy, based on a grounded theory analysis, was found to have three distinct functions pertaining to organizational communications. Firstly, empathy is social. The capacity for empathy varies widely across populations, both within and without organizations and it is a manifestation of social support and care for others. Secondly, it serves strategic purposes. It can aid in the gathering of valuable information, reduce tensions, facilitate openness to new ideas, and lead to the development of actionable goals. Finally, empathy has a communicative function. It supports open, efficient and productive communication practices within and without organizations. The study findings largely support Zhao et al.’s notion that empathy serves social and communicative functions, and adds to it by proposing that empathy serves a strategic purpose when studied in applied to organizational communications.

RQ3 To what extent are organizations that are perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders also perceived to be opinion leaders by their internal stakeholders?"

Empathy is perceived to positively impact opinion leadership of organizations, though the extent of this influence is context-dependent.

The third research question “To what extent are organizations that are perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders also perceived to be opinion leaders by their internal stakeholders?” was explored in both the qualitative and quantitative phases of this study. There was very little available literature found relating these concepts, with the most marked example being Learner’s (1958) hypothesis that increased exposure to participatory media facilitates the development of individual empathetic skill. In the qualitative interviews, grounded theory analysis suggested that empathy was perceived to positively impact the opinion leadership of organizations. Participants viewed an organization’s degree of influence as being dependent on organizational leadership and public facing workers, and several participants noted that empathy is an attractive and resonating characteristic; it facilitates connections/relationships and encourages both financial and emotional buy-in from publics. These findings were supported quantitatively, as a significant positive correlation (0.838) was found relating the opinion leadership (POLOC) and empathy (PEOC) scales devised for this study. In addition, confirmatory path analysis found an extant, significant positive Pearson product-moment of 0.83 between empathy and opinion leadership. While these values are highly encouraging, the total of 29 completed responses obtained in this study falls below commonly accepted sample sizes (Hinkin et al., 1997). Thus, the results are not generalizable, but do provide some support for the qualitative findings.

In addition, this study put forward a mixed method research question, asking “How do themes gathered from the qualitative interviews help to explain the potential relationship between empathy and opinion leadership in an organizational context?” The quantitative component of the study revealed a strong extant correlation (+0.838) between perceived organizational empathy and perceived organizational opinion leadership, though the number of responses was too few to consider the results generalizable. The qualitative analysis of the interviews did provide several key insights, however, that support an extant, positive relationship between empathy and opinion leadership in organizations. Firstly,

findings suggest empathy can be understood as a multidimensional construct, encompassing comprehension of others' experiences, socio-cultural aspects, strategic aspects, and communicative elements. As discussed in relation to RQ 3, empathy is perceived to positively impact opinion leadership of organizations, though the extent of its influence is context dependent. Finally, empathetic organizations are perceived as those organizations that try to foster two-way empathetic relationships and communications with their stakeholders. Taking all resultant themes and subthemes from the qualitative analysis into account, a grounded theory emerges from the data, stating: organizations may be considered empathetic if they make an effort to comprehend the experiences, thoughts and emotions, of their stakeholders while still meeting business goals; empathy in organizations has social, strategic and communicative functions, and it is perceived to positively impact opinion leadership of organizations.

Ethical Considerations

This research project involved human participants, and as such, there are ethical implications to consider. The key issues for this project involved the protection of participant anonymity, confidentiality of data, and the administration of a comprehensive informed consent document to all participants for each phase of the investigation. The potential risks associated with this study were considered to be minimal. This research was not funded, eliminating any monetary conflicts of interest. Further, there are no other known conflicts of interest which could influence results and selection of participant organizations.

Role of Researcher and Limitations

I, Alyssa Simon, am a graduate student attending Mount Saint Vincent University. A sequential study was chosen for this investigation because I work part-time and could not take on the compounded work of a convergent study. Based on my past research experience, I was also most comfortable working in an organizational context. I recognize that I became a data collection instrument when conducting one-on-one qualitative interviews and acknowledge the information gathered was filtered through the biases and experiences of the interviewees. Further, this information was provided to me in a constructed environment and may have been influenced by researcher or participant bias. As I had no direct

interaction with survey participants, I did not anticipate that my biases, values and background would shape the interpretation of the quantitative results. I endeavoured to be diligently objective with respect to the qualitative data analysis; however, it is understood that my preconceived assumptions about the participant organizations may have affected qualitative results.

Conclusion

This study, *Perceptions of Empathy and opinion Leadership in Organizational Communication*, represents the first known attempt to gain insight into perceived empathy and perceived opinion leadership in organizations. It was one among few attempts to look at online applications of opinion leadership, in general. Each of the three research questions put forward in this study were satisfactorily addressed, and the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative investigations were complimentary with the central insights being: the definition of empathy in an organizational context is multidimensional; empathy in organizations has social, strategic and communicative functions; and, organizational empathy and opinion leadership are positively related, though each can exist within organizations independent of the other. The central limitation to this study was the small number of respondents that participated in the quantitative study, as this inhibits the generalizability of the results. In the near future, I would like to test the internal consistency and reliability of the PEOC and POLOC scales with a much larger population. Once validated, these scales could prove useful metrics in measuring perceived organizational empathy and opinion leadership in organizations. Further, this study significantly contributes to extant literature by furthering understanding of empathy in relation to organizational communications and culture.

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Appendix A: List of Tables

Table 1
Research Questions

RQ1	How is empathy defined in a professional communication context?
RQ2	What is the role of empathy in organizational communications?
RQ3	To what extent are organizations that are perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders also perceived to be opinion leaders by their internal stakeholders?

Table 2
Factor Analysis of Scale Items

Scale	No. of Items	No. of Factors	Cronbach's Alpha	Factor Loading Range	Mean
Perceived Empathy in Organizational Communications	14	4 ²	.915	0.409 - 0.919	5.39
Perceived Opinion Leadership in Organizational Communications	14	3 ³	.904	0.437 -0.943	5.18

Table 3
Scale Means of Participant Organizations

Item	Overall Mean	Org. A	Org. B	Org. C
Perceived Empathy in Organizational Communications	5.39	6.13	5.04	5.79
Perceived Opinion Leadership in Organizational Communications	5.18	5.84	4.93	5.36

² Factors: Care and Compassion; Demonstrable Actions; Awareness of Others and Advocacy; Two-Way Engagement.

³ Factors: Quality of Communication; Degree of Influence; Audience Engagement.

Table 4
PEOC Scale Item Means

Item	Overall			
	Mean	Org. A	Org. B	Org. C
1. My organization cares about me.	5.96	6.75	5.88	5.71
2. My organization engages in perspective-taking in its online communications (social media, Internet, email).	5.75	6.00	5.59	6.00
3. My organization shows concern for others in its online communications.	5.76	6.00	5.53	6.13
4. Compared to other organizations, my place of work tries to understand its employees/stakeholders/followers better by imagining how things look from their perspectives.	5.41	5.75	5.35	5.38
5. My place of work tries to look at both sides of a question before coming up with a solution.	5.31	5.75	5.06	5.63
6. My organization is compassionate. ⁴	5.76	6.75	5.53	5.75
7. My organization stands up for people that are being taken advantage of.	5.04	6.00	4.50	5.63
8. My organization shares content on social media that stands up for people that are being taken advantage of.	4.04	6.25	3.27	4.38
9. My organization shows tender, concerned feelings for less fortunate persons.	5.55	5.75	5.12	6.37
10. My organization supports, campaigns for, or advocates charitable causes in its online communications.	6.03	6.00	5.94	6.25
11. I believe my organization is charitable. ⁵	6.41	6.50	6.29	6.63
12. I am touched by things I see happening in my organization.	5.48	6.00	5.00	6.25
13. My organization shares heartwarming messages in its online communications.	5.31	6.75	4.53	6.25
14. My organization engages in conversations with its followers on social media to better understand where they're coming from.	5.10	5.50	4.71	5.75

⁴ Originally a reversed question, worded "My organization is not compassionate."

⁵ Originally a reversed question, worded "I do not believe my organization is charitable."

Table 5
POLOC Scale Item Means

Item	Overall Mean	Org. A	Org. B	Org. C
1. In general, my organization (my place of work) is active on social media/the Internet.	5.83	6.25	5.76	5.75
2. When the organization communicates via social media, it gives a great deal of information.	5.31	5.75	5.12	5.50
3. During the past 6 months the organization has been particularly active on its social media profiles.	5.45	6.00	5.18	5.75
4. Compared to other organizations, my place of work shares useful and relevant information in its online communications (social media, Internet, email, etc.)	5.69	6.25	5.53	5.75
5. I consider the communications shared by my organization to be valuable and interesting.	5.48	6.00	5.29	5.63
6. My organization often shares its opinion/viewpoints on relevant issues via social media/Internet/email.	4.43	5.50	4.06	4.63
7. I often look to my organization as a source of advice, not just direction.	4.45	5.25	4.24	4.50
8. I identify with the values my organization represents.	5.72	6.25	5.53	5.88
9. I consider my organization to be influential.	5.48	6.00	4.94	6.38
10. I consider my organization to be well informed.	5.62	5.75	5.47	5.88
11. I follow/friend my organization on social media.	5.17	6.00	4.59	6.00
12. When the organization communicates via social media, it provides adequate information. ⁶	5.31	6.75	4.82	5.63
13. I believe that when my organization communicates via the Internet/social media, it reaches a large number of people.	5.00	6.00	4.76	5.00
14. The organization is a provider of advice, rather than dependent on advice from its stakeholders. ⁷	3.83	4.00	4.29	2.75

⁶ Originally a reversed question, worded “When the organization communicates via social media, it gives very little information.”

⁷ Originally a reversed question, worded “The organization is dependent on advice from its stakeholders, rather than a provider of advice.”

Table 6
Impact of Participant Age on Scale Items

Scale	Overall Mean	<25	30-35	<40	<45	<50	<55	<60	>60	No Answer
Perceived Empathy in Organizational Communications	5.39	6.21	6.21	4.95	5.46	5.64	5.60	4.50	5.93	4.67
Perceived Opinion Leadership in Organizational Communications	5.18	5.61	6.04	4.77	5.47	5.21	5.04	4.42	6.21	4.36

Table 7
Impact of Participant Gender on Scale Items

Scale	Overall Mean	Male	Female	No Answer
Perceived Empathy in Organizational Communications	5.39	5.66	5.42	4.83
Perceived Opinion Leadership in Organizational Communications	5.18	5.30	5.35	4.40

Table 8
Impact of Participant Role in Organization on Scale Items

Scale	Overall Mean	Casual	Technical	Supervisor	Mgt./Dir./VP	Other
Perceived Empathy in Organizational Communications	5.39	4.86	4.59	5.62	5.93	5.56
Perceived Opinion Leadership in Organizational Communications	5.18	4.68	5.06	4.90	5.68	5.39

Table 9
Impact of Participant Employment Duration on Scale Items

Scale	Overall Mean	<5 Years	<10 Years	<15 Years	<20 Years	>20 Years
Perceived Empathy in Organizational Communications	5.39	5.76	5.76	4.90	5.33	5.13
Perceived Opinion Leadership in Organizational Communications	5.18	5.41	5.56	4.98	5.24	4.74

Table 10
Empathy Factor Question Means

Item	Overall Mean	Org. A	Org. B	Org. C
1. I trust my organization.	5.45	6.00	5.35	5.38
2. My organization trusts me.	5.97	6.50	5.82	6.00
3. I respect my organization.	5.97	6.75	5.88	5.75
4. My organization respects me.	5.66	6.00	5.53	5.75
5. I am patient with my organization.	5.79	6.50	5.65	5.75
6. My organization is patient with me.	5.76	6.50	5.53	5.88
7. I believe an organization can be truly empathetic.	5.28	5.25	5.18	5.50
8. Workplace empathy and personal empathy are the same thing.	3.86	4.25	4.18	3.00
9. I am happy where I work.	5.69	6.00	5.71	5.50
10. I would like to work for an empathetic organization.	5.79	6.25	5.71	5.75

Table 11
5 Best and Worst Performing Survey Item Overall Means

Item	Overall Mean
The organization is a provider of advice, rather than dependent on advice from its stakeholders. ⁸	3.83
Workplace empathy and personal empathy are the same thing.	3.86
My organization shares content on social media that stands up for people that are being taken advantage of.	4.04
My organization often shares its opinion/viewpoints on relevant issues via social media/Internet/email.	4.43
I often look to my organization as a source of advice, not just direction.	4.45
My organization cares about me.	5.96
My organization trusts me.	5.97
I respect my organization.	5.97
My organization supports, campaigns for, or advocates charitable causes in its online communications.	6.03
I believe my organization is charitable. ⁹	6.41

Table 12
Significant PEOC and POLOC Scale Correlations

Item	Mean	PEOC Correlation ¹⁰	POLOC Correlation ¹¹
PEOC Scale	5.39	1	.838
POLOC Scale	5.18	.838	1
I trust my organization.	5.45	.676	.510
My organization trusts me.	5.97	.719	.631
I respect my organization.	5.97	.760	.626
My organization respects me.	5.66	.819	.729
I am patient with my organization.	5.79	.789	.695
My organization is patient with me.	5.76	.808	.648
I believe an organization can be truly empathetic.	5.28	.560	-
Workplace empathy and personal empathy are the same thing.	3.86	-	-
I am happy where I work.	5.69	.755	.645
I would like to work for an empathetic organization.	5.79	-	-

⁸ Originally a reversed question, worded “The organization is dependent on advice from its stakeholders, rather than a provider of advice.”

⁹ Originally a reversed question, worded “I do not believe my organization is charitable.”

¹⁰ Pearson Correlation significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

¹¹ Pearson Correlation significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Table 13

Additional Correlations of Note

Item	Correlation ¹²
My organization trusts me AND I am patient with my organization	.883
I respect my organization AND My organization respects me	.821
I respect my organization AND I am happy where I work	.888
My organization respects me AND I am patient with my organization	.776
My organization respects me AND My organization is patient with me	.841
My organization respects me AND I am happy where I work	.900
I am patient with my organization AND My organization is patient with me	.851

¹² Pearson Correlation significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

Appendix B: List of Figures

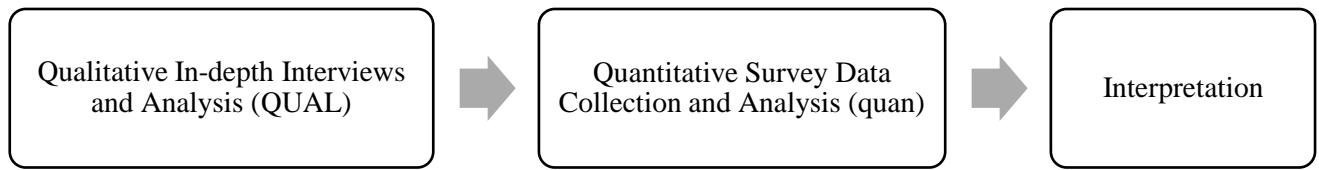


Figure 1. Procedural diagram of explanatory sequential mixed methods study.

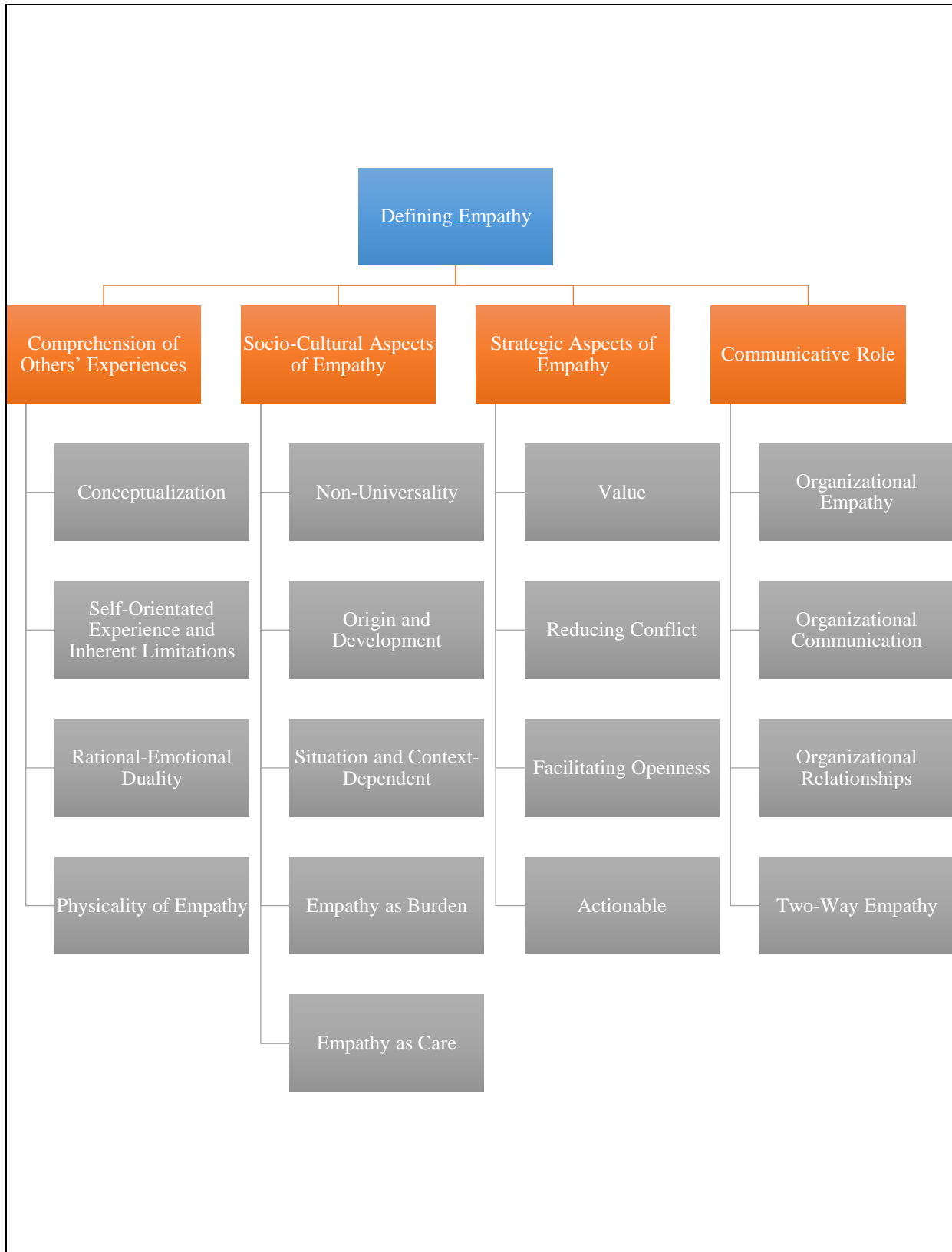


Figure 2. Themes from Section 1: Defining Empathy

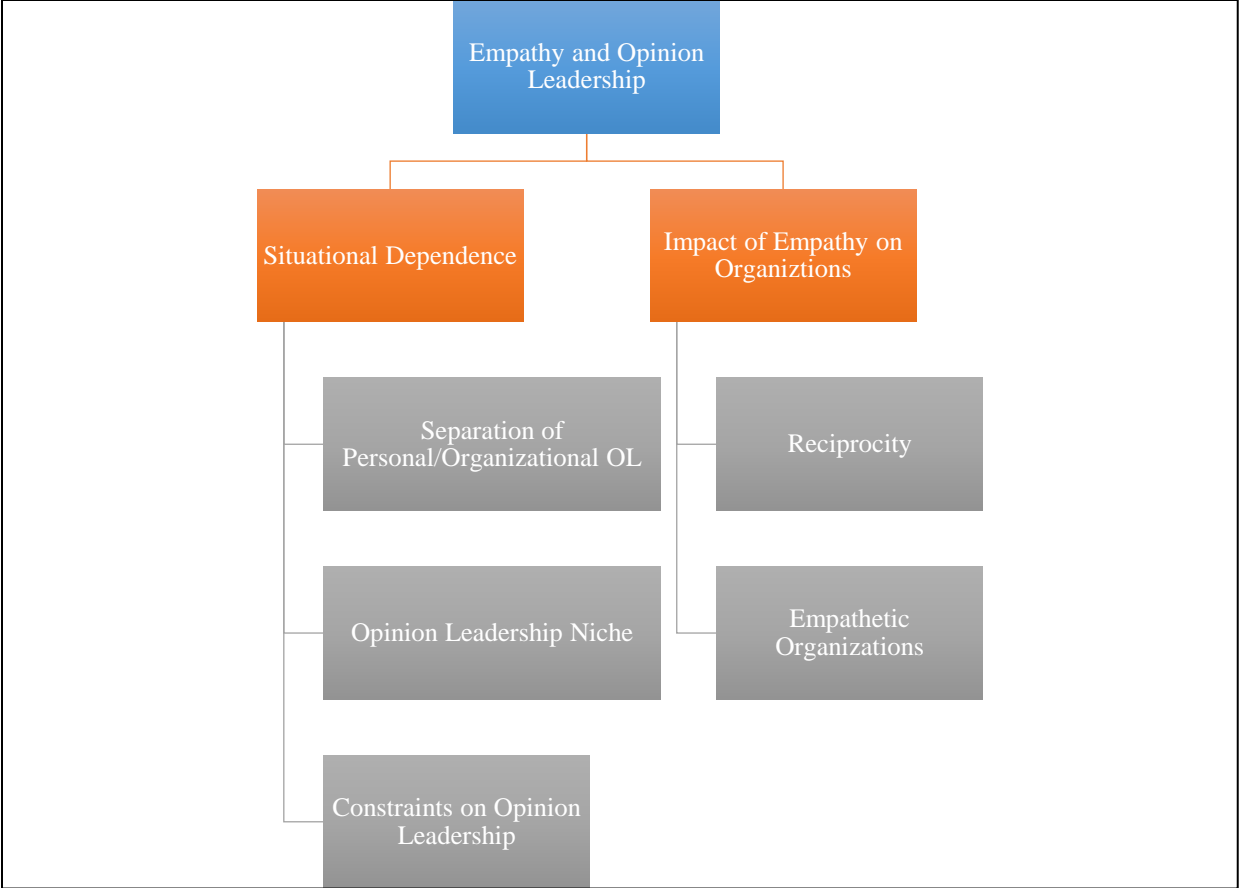


Figure 3. Themes from Section 2: Empathy and Opinion Leadership

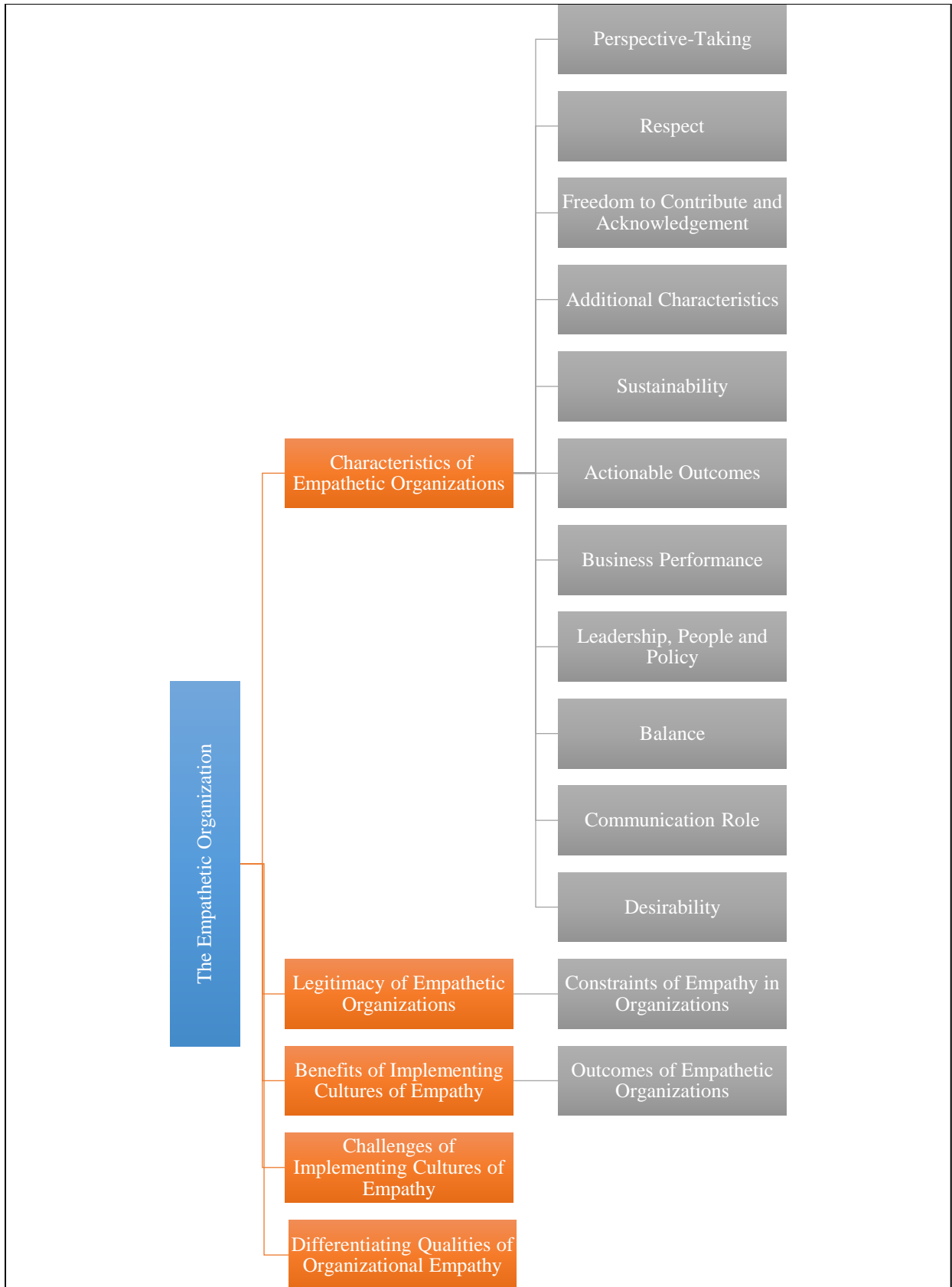


Figure 4. Themes from Section 3: The Empathetic Organization

Organization A	Organization B	Organization C
Email Text Online Social Platforms Phone Face-to-Face Pod Casts	Email Website Online Social Platforms Texting	Email Online Social Platforms Email Newsletters Advertising Phone Face-to-Face Signage/Posters

Figure 5. Communication mediums most frequently used by interview participants.

Themes	Open Coding
<i>Communication & Relationship</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing, honest communication; facilitate a positive environment (A1) (A4) (A5) • Communicating and listening; two-way communication (A7) • Clear, ongoing, jargon free communication practices (A9) (B3) (B4) • Communication in line with what stakeholders expect, minimizing ambiguity (A9) • Tailoring communications to fit needs (A10) (B3) • Keeping stakeholders informed; cascading information flow, so organization members are informed first and able to pass on/clarify information as it reaches larger publics (A12) (B2) (C1) • Timely reporting, responding (B4) • Validating/acknowledging other ideas, point of view, even if they are not used; facility's sense of belonging, loyalty (A2) (A7) • Celebrate stakeholders (A4) • Prioritizing and improving and customer experience (A6) • Fostering engagement with organization (C1) • Building trust by consistently meeting expectations (A8)
<i>Knowledge of Audience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consideration (A2) • Listening, understanding needs, openness to new ideas (A2) • Understanding (A3) • Listening to stakeholders to identify needs, changes to be addressed (A9) • Understanding stakeholders (A10) • Know audiences; different needs associated with different audiences (B3) (C1) • Understanding others' situations, needs and create solutions when possible (C2)
<i>Organization Characteristics</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability (A1) (A4) (A5) • Patience (A3) • Authentic (A4) • Collaborative environment (A5) • Openness to ideas (A9) • Transparency (B2) (B4)
<i>Empathetic Characteristics</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidence or demonstrations of care for society and responsibility for meeting business needs (A8) • Two-way understanding (B3) • Treat others as you would like to be treated (A2)

Figure 6. Focussed coding of interview question exploring building positive relationships with stakeholders.

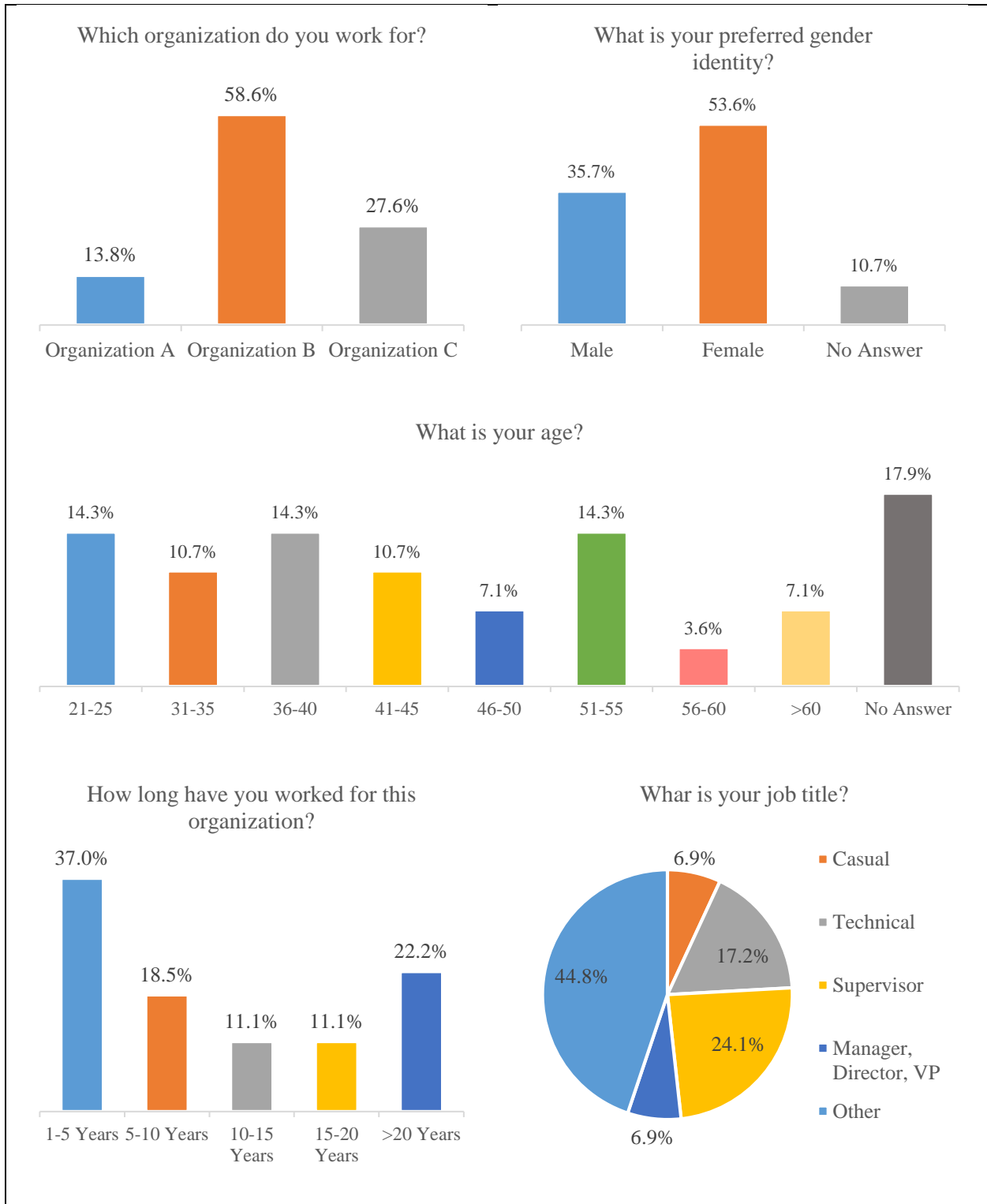


Figure 7. Survey participant demographic question responses.

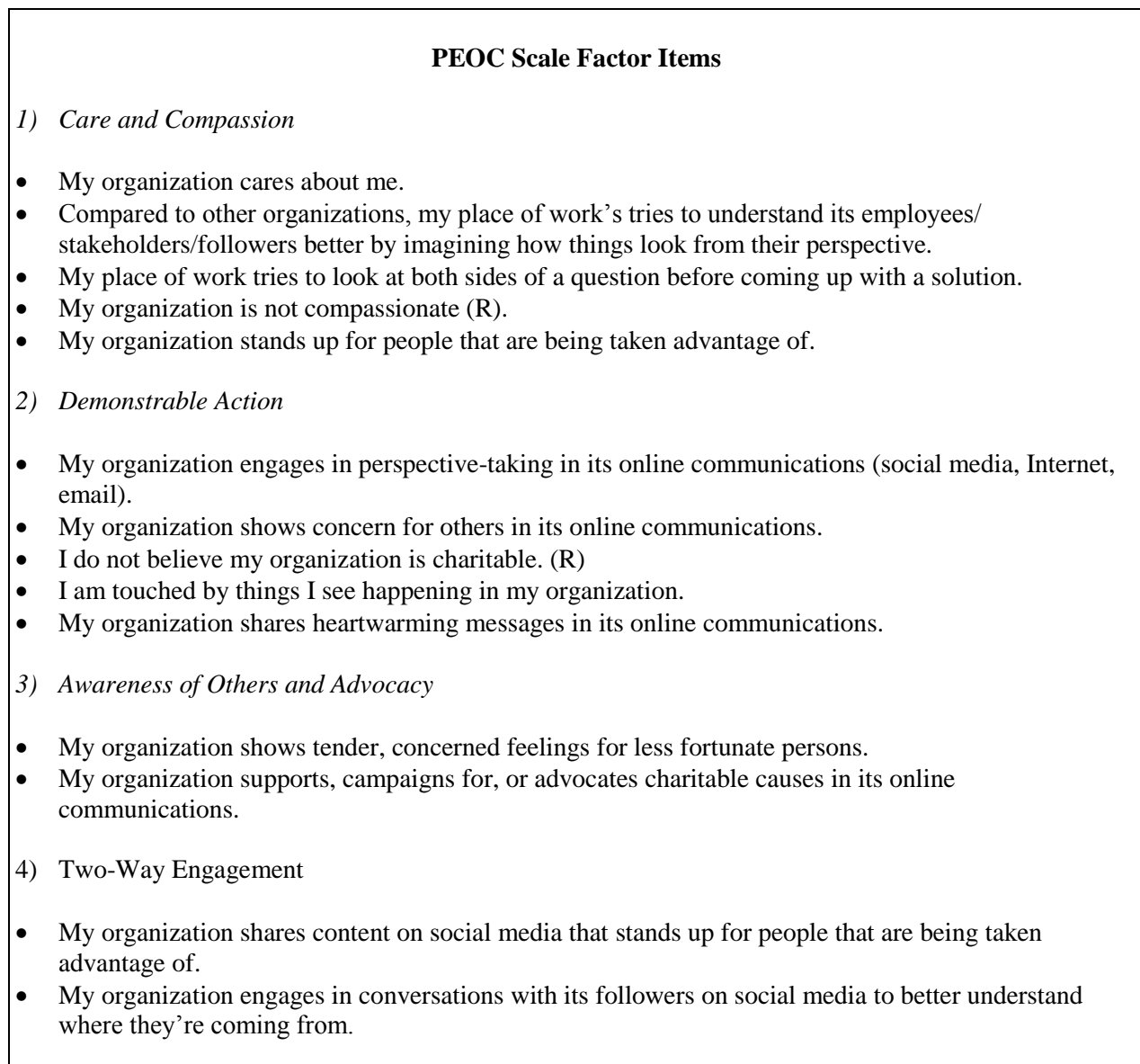


Figure 8. PEOC Factor Groupings

POLOC Scale Factor Items*1) Quality of Communication*

- In general, my organization (my place of work) is active on social media/the Internet.
- When the organization communicates via social media, it gives a great deal of information.
- During the past 6 months the organization has been particularly active on its social media profiles.
- Compared to other organizations, my place of work shares useful and relevant information in its online communications (social media, Internet, email, etc.).
- I consider the communications shared by my organization to be valuable and interesting
- I consider my organization to be well informed.
- When the organization communicates via social media, it gives very little information (R).

2) Degree of Influence

- My organization often shares its opinion/viewpoints on relevant issues via social media/Internet/email.
- I often look to my organization as a source of advice, not just direction.
- I believe that when my organization communicates via the Internet/social media, it reaches a large number of people.

3) Audience Engagement

- I identify with the values my organization represents.
- I consider my organization to be influential.
- I follow/friend my organization on social media.
- The organization is dependent on advice from its stakeholders, rather than a provider of advice (R).

Figure 9. POLOC Factor Groupings

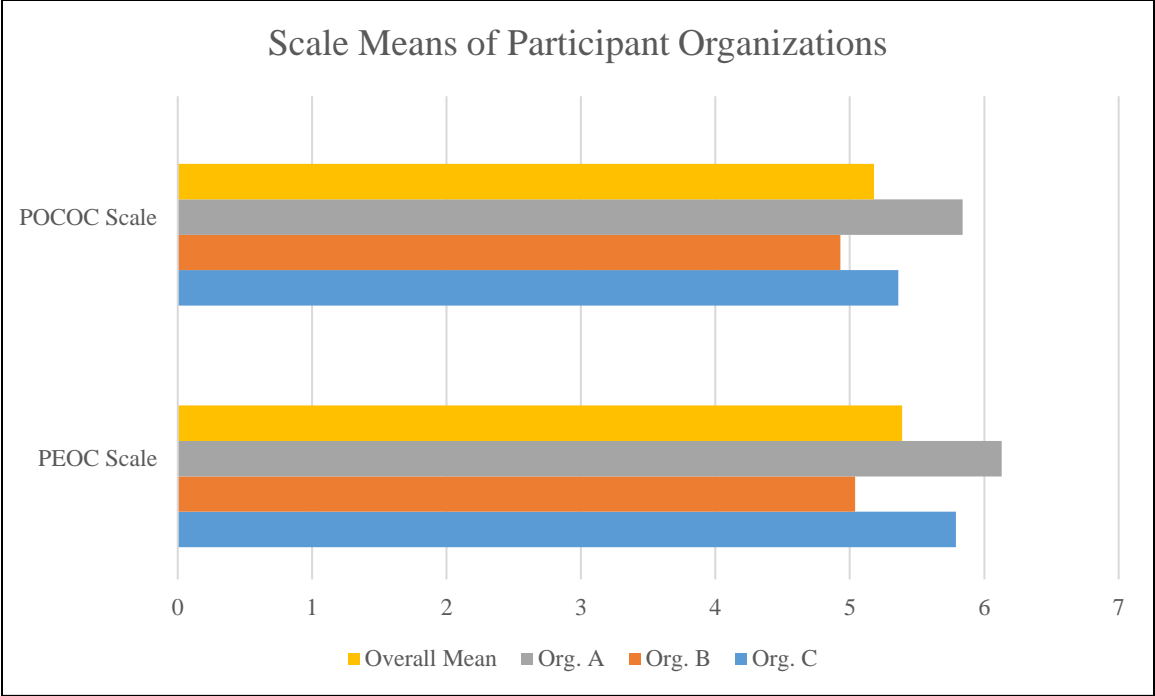


Figure 10. Scale Means of Participant Organizations

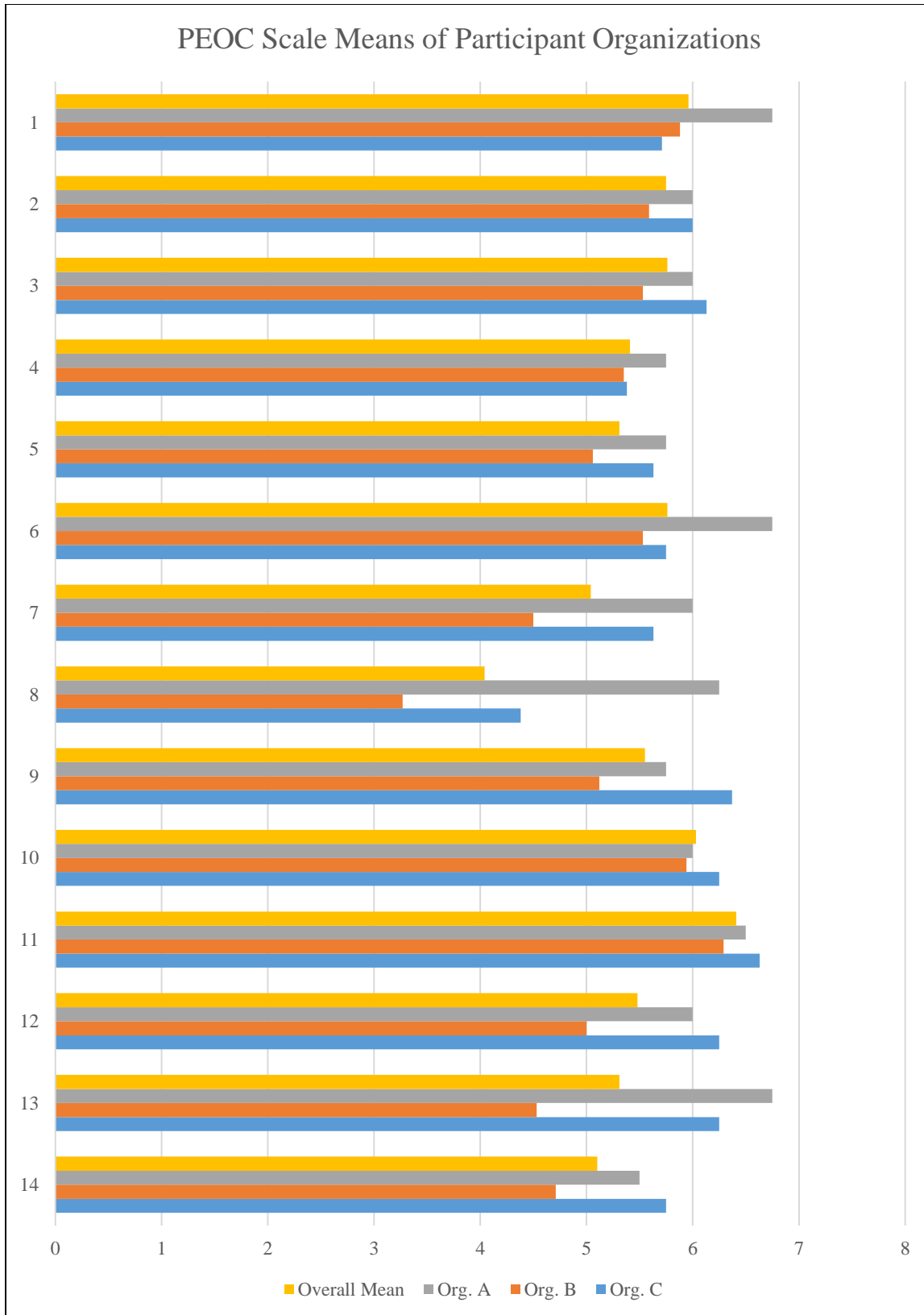


Figure 11. PEOC Scale Item Means

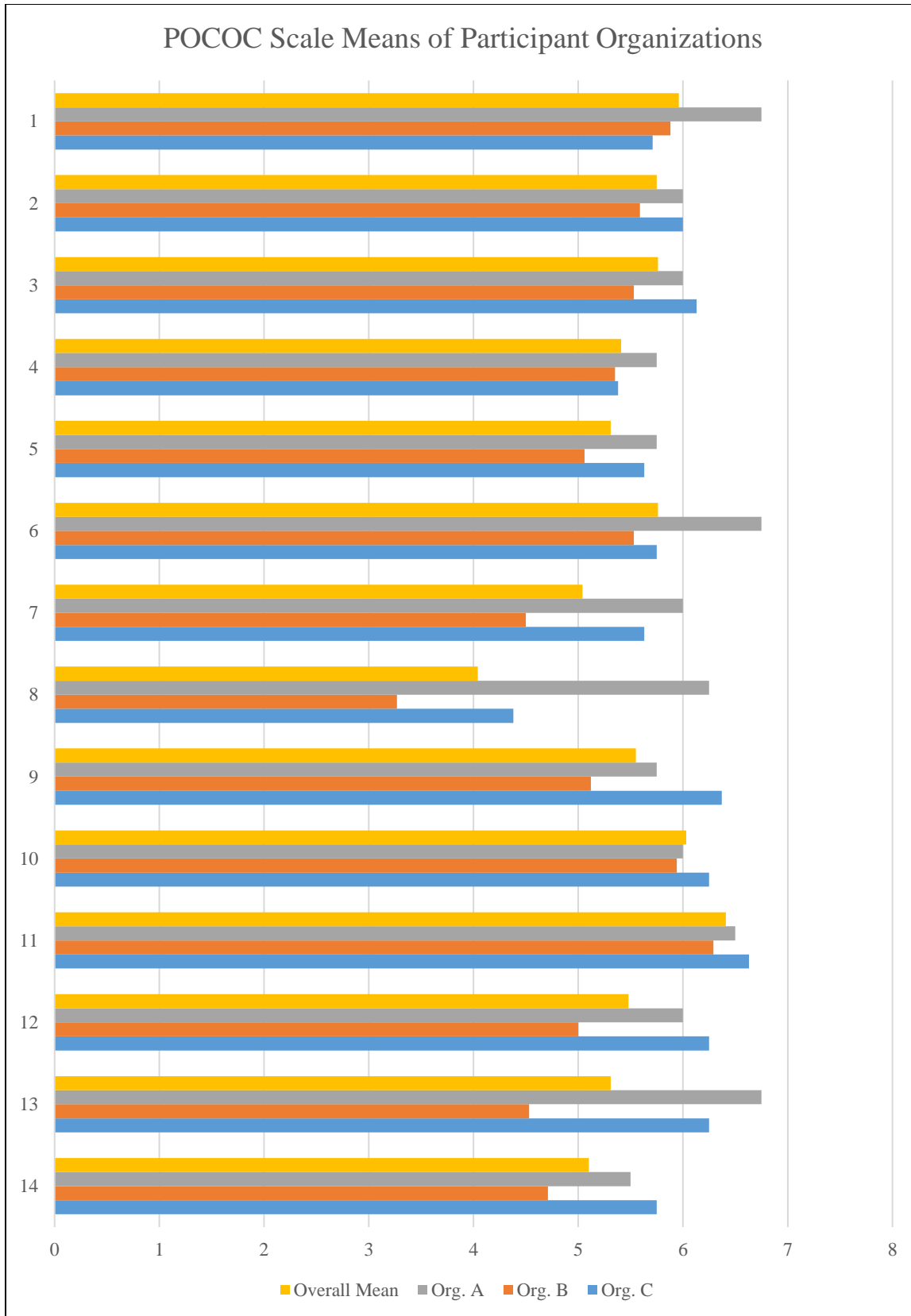


Figure 12. POLOC Scale Item Means

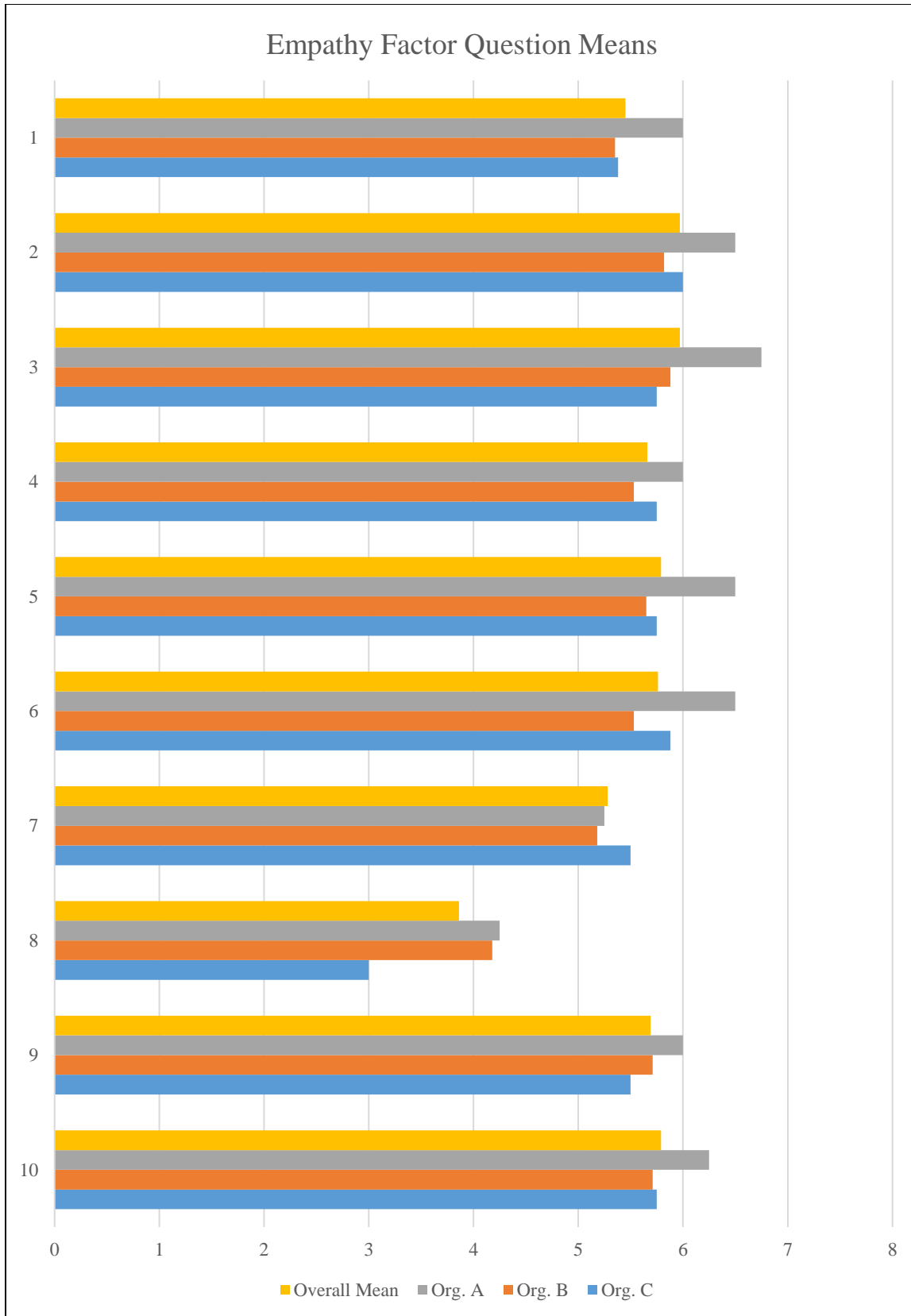


Figure 13. Empathy Factor Question Means

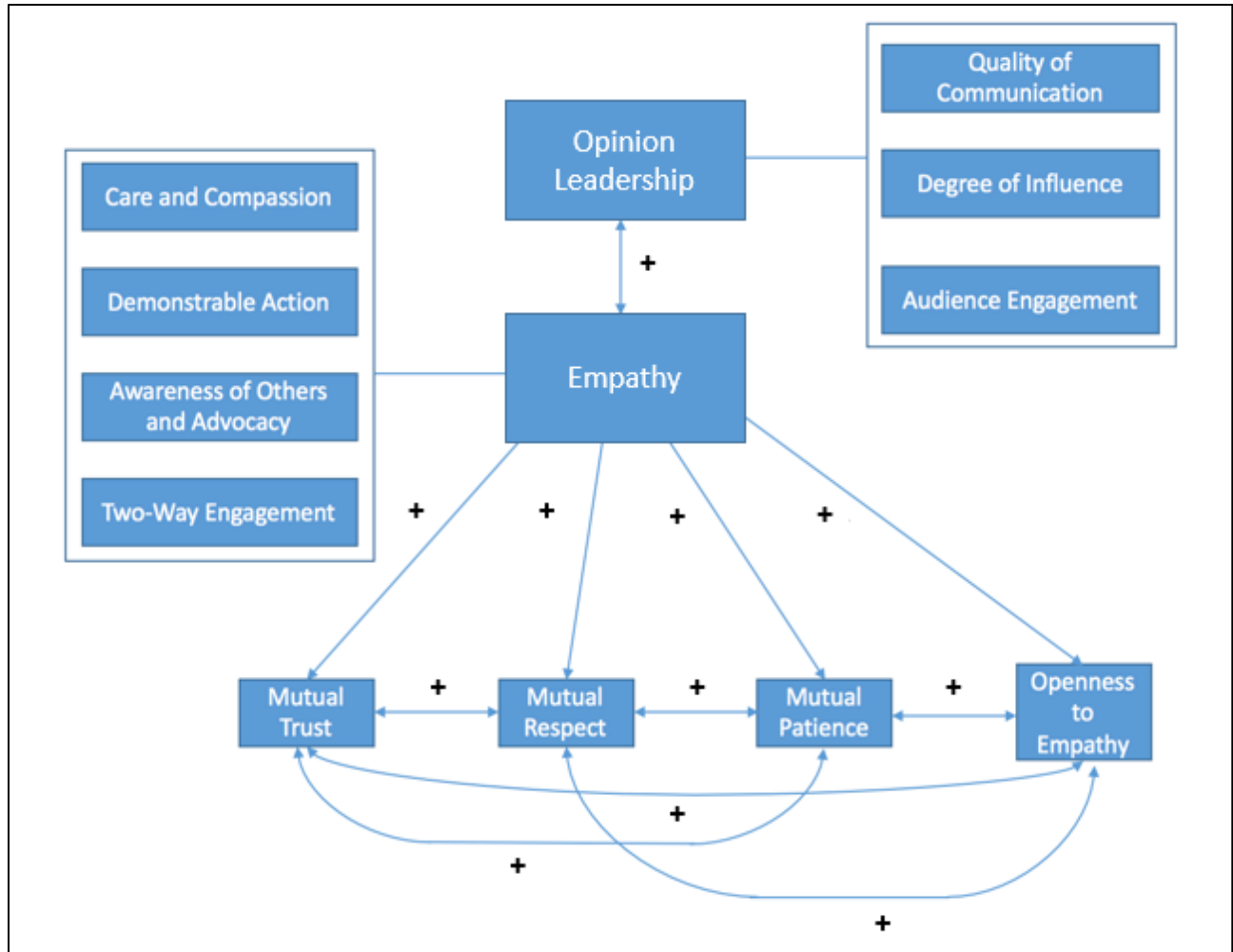


Figure 14. Initial Model Devised for Path Analysis

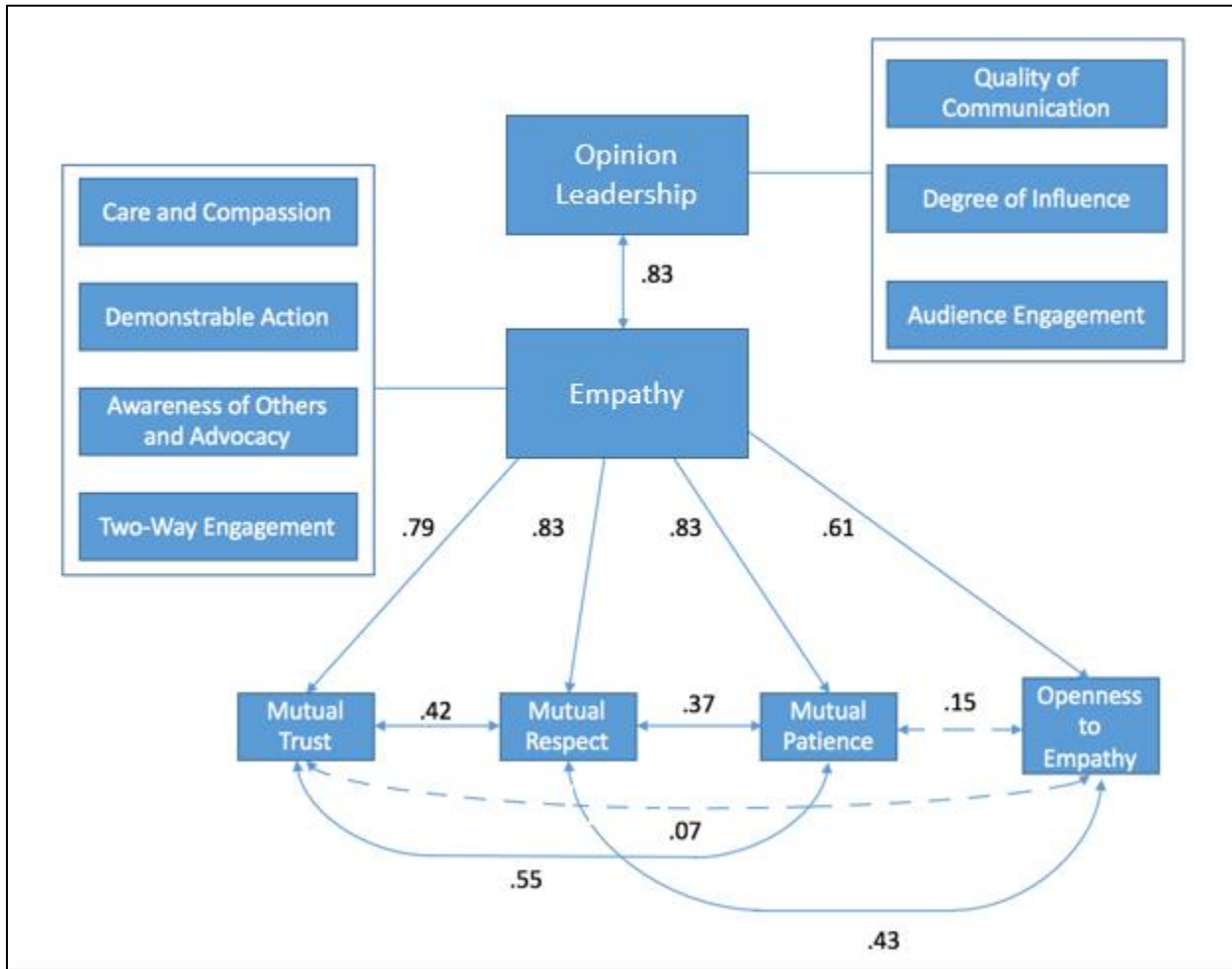


Figure 15. Path Analysis Resultant Model. Dashed lines indicate non-significant findings.

What can your organization or supervisor do to be more empathetic?

- Foster an environment where employees and employer (management) are equally heard.
- All is OK, face to face time is readily available with all team members. Having said that, none of us share as much as we did for the past 4 years, just an interesting observation which dates all my comments as 6 to 9 months old.
- Be more diverse in its hiring of contractors/freelancers/actors...etc.
- Truthfully, I think my organization goes above and beyond to help those in need. I am inspired by my organization and I really enjoy working here as it is a very positive and caring place to work.
- We can all try to better understand what each of us do, what value we are each bringing and that we are all critical to the success of the organization, to people and make decisions based on situational evidence.
- Take the time out of their busy day to ask how things are going with you. A little bit of kindness goes a long way. Our lives have become so busy people all over the World do not take time to be friendly and kind.
- My supervisor is very empathetic and advocates for my success. My organization is building a healthy community and cares about the members, volunteers and clients.
- Be more personable.
- Just ensuring that all parties involved in any sort of decision are consulted and their unique needs are considered when making changes or decisions.
- Senior Management should practice what they preach.

Could you describe any online interactions you have, or communications you receive, from your employer? (For example, do you follow your employer on social media? Do you receive email correspondence/newsletters from your organization? Etc.)

- Follow on all Social Media.
- Yes to all the above, social sharing is alive and well, face to face sharing has been reduced lately unless the time is arranged to share.
- Mostly by email but on social media, usually being tagged in posts about a new project release.
- Follow on social media, communicate through email, e-boards
- None that I can think off at the top of my head but my organizations are always doing events, etc. to help worthy causes and help those in need. Emails are always sent out to inform us asking if we want to participate.
- Social media, email and news feeds.
- I receive lots of information from social media
- I receive bi-monthly staff e-newsletters, we have a staff Facebook page where employees post what is happening at their site or department and it allows us to feel more connected as a team.
- Facebook notifications, email newsletters.
- Follow on line and receive newsletters.

Figure 16. Complete list of responses to two open-ended survey questions.

Appendix C: Survey Invitation to Participate**Invitation to Participate in Survey**

Dear Sir or Madam:

My name is Alyssa Simon and I am a graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University beginning research for my M.A. (Communication Studies) thesis. Your organization has recently partnered with myself to embark on an exciting new research project in the field of communication studies.

The research aims to understand empathy and its role in organizational communications. As part of this study, I am inviting you to participate in a brief survey about the organization you work for. I am interested in learning about your experience with your employer.

The survey will be conducted online and will consist of questions about your experiences. The survey will be conducted in English and will likely last 10-15 minutes. If you choose to decline participation, confidentiality is assured and the decision to participate (or not) will in no way be shared with others.

If you are willing to participate in the survey, please click the following link:

<https://surveys.msvu.ca/index.php?r=survey/index&sid=559438&lang=en>

If you would like more information about the research process, please contact Alyssa Simon at Alyssa.Simon@msvu.ca.

Thanks very much,

Alyssa

*Alyssa Simon,
Graduate Research Assistant, Applied Communication Research
Department of Communication Studies, McCain 306A
Mount Saint Vincent University
(w) 902-xxx-xxxx (c) 506-xxx-xxxx
Alyssa.Simon@msvu.ca*

Appendix D: Survey Informed Consent

Perceptions of Empathy in Opinion Leadership

You are being invited to take part in the research study named above. It is important that you understand the purpose of this study, how it may affect you, the risks and benefits of taking part, and what you will be asked to do, before you decide if it is in your best interest to take part in the study. You do not have to take part in the study. Taking part is entirely voluntary (your choice). If you have any questions that this form does not answer, the researcher will be happy to give you further information.

The researcher is interested in learning how you understand empathy and its role in organizational communications. The insights gained through this interview will inform a survey that will explore the extent to which organizations are perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders and how this may, in turn, impact organizational influence.

If you agree to enter into this study, you will be asked to participate in a survey about your experiences with the organization you work for. The survey will be conducted online and will consist of questions about your experiences. The survey will likely last 10-15 minutes. If you choose to decline participation, confidentiality is assured and the decision to participate (or not) will in no way be shared with others. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The researcher does not anticipate any potential harms from the study. You are free to refuse to answer any question at any time without having to give any reason. You may experience no direct benefits from participating in the study. However, the knowledge gained from a study may provide a better understanding of online organizational communications and online influence. This may result in improved performance in the area of social media communications at your organization.

Participation in this study is entirely VOLUNTARY. You may withdraw from the study at any point up until or just prior to publication of the findings, approximately April 1, 2017. Your participation is ANONYMOUS. Therefore, no one will know whether or not you have participated in this research.

If you have any questions, please contact me, Alyssa Simon, at (506) xxx -xxxx, Alyssa.Simon@msvu.ca. If you have any questions about how the study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) c/o MSVU Research and International Office at (902) 457-6350 or via email at research@msvu.ca.

By clicking “I Agree,” you are not waiving any of your rights.

By clicking “I Agree,” you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agreed to participate in the study.

- I Agree
- I Do Not Agree

Appendix E: Perceived Empathy Scale Items

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Slightly Disagree	4 Neutral	5 Slightly Agree	6 Agree	7 Strongly Agree
My organization cares about me.							
My organization engages in perspective-taking in its online communications (social media, Internet, email).							
My organization shows concern for others in its online communications.							
Compared to other organizations, my place of work's tries to understand its employees/ stakeholders/followers better by imagining how things look from their perspective.							
My place of work tries to look at both sides of a question before coming up with a solution.							
My organization is not compassionate (R).							
My organization stands up for people that are being taken advantage of.							
My organization shares content on social media that stands up for people that are being taken advantage of.							
My organization shows tender, concerned feelings for less fortunate persons.							
My organization supports, campaigns for, or advocates charitable causes in its							

online communications.							
I do not believe my organization is charitable. (R)							
I am touched by things I see happening in my organization.							
My organization shares heartwarming messages in its online communications.							
My organization engages in conversations with its followers on social media to better understand where they're coming from.							

Appendix F: Perceived OL Scale Items

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Slightly Disagree	4 Neutral	5 Slightly Agree	6 Agree	7 Strongly Agree
In general, my organization (my place of work) is active on social media/the Internet.							
When the organization communicates via social media, it gives a great deal of information.							
During the past 6 months the organization has been particularly active on its social media profiles.							
Compared to other organizations, my place of work shares useful and relevant information in its online communications (social media, Internet, email, etc.)							
I consider the communications shared by my organization to be valuable and interesting							
My organization often shares its opinion/viewpoints on relevant issues via social media/Internet/email.							
I often look to my organization as a source of advice, not just direction.							
I identify with the values my organization represents.							
I consider my organization to be influential.							
I consider my organization to be well informed.							

I follow/friend my organization on social media.							
When the organization communicates via social media, it gives very little information (R).							
I believe that when my organization communicates via the Internet/social media, it reaches a large number of people.							
The organization is dependent on advice from its stakeholders, rather than a provider of advice (R).							

Appendix G: Survey Demographic Questions

1. Which of the following organizations do you work for?
 - Organization A
 - Organization B
 - Organization C

2. How did you hear about this survey?
 - My organization
 - My manager
 - A coworker
 - The researcher
 - Other

3. Which best describes your role in the organization?
 - Casual
 - Technical Worker
 - Supervisor
 - Manager or Director, VP, or comparable role.
 - Other

4. What is your preferred gender identity?
 - Male
 - Female
 - No Answer

5. What is your age?
 - Younger than 20
 - 21 – 25
 - 26 – 30
 - 31-35
 - 36-40
 - 41-45
 - 46 – 50
 - 51 – 55
 - 56-60
 - Older than 60
 - Prefer not to disclose

6. How long have you worked at the organization?
 - Less than 1 year
 - 1 – 5 years
 - 6 – 10 years
 - 11 – 15 years
 - 16 – 20 years

- More than 20 years
7. What can your organization or supervisor do to be more empathetic?
 8. Could you describe any online interactions you have, or communications you receive, from your employer? (For example, do you follow your employer on social media? Do you receive email correspondence/newsletters from your organization? Etc.)
 9. Is there anything you would like to contribute that was not touched on in this survey?

Appendix H: Empathy Factor Questions

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Slightly Disagree	4 Neutral	5 Slightly Agree	6 Agree	7 Strongly Agree
I trust my organization.							
My organization trusts me.							
I respect my organization.							
My organization respects me.							
I am patient with my organization.							
My organization is patient with me.							
I believe an organization can be truly empathetic.							
Workplace empathy and personal empathy are the same thing.							
I am happy where I work.							
I would like to work for an empathetic organization.							

Appendix I: Interview Invitation to Participate

March 3, 2017

Dear Sir or Madam:

My name is Alyssa Simon and I am a graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University beginning research for my M.A. (Communication Studies) thesis. I am inviting you to participate and share your expertise in an exciting new research project in the field of communication studies.

The researcher is interested in learning how you understand empathy and its role in organizational communications.

As part of this study I am inviting you to participate in a one-on-one interview with myself (of approximately 20 minutes) at a time and place of your convenience, either in-person or by telephone. The insights gained through this interview will inform a survey that will explore the extent to which organizations are perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders and how this may, in turn, impact organizational influence.

Participation in these interviews is voluntary and confidential. Although I, Alyssa Simon, will know who I am interviewing, the information provided to others will be stripped of all identifiable data, and you will be mentioned only as 'participant X' in any report.

If you are willing to participate in an interview, or would like more information about the research process, please contact Alyssa Simon at Alyssa.Simon@msvu.ca.

Thanks very much,

Alyssa

Alyssa Simon,
Graduate Research Assistant, Applied Communication Research
Department of Communication Studies, McCain 306A
Mount Saint Vincent University
(w) 902-xxx-xxxx (c) 506-xxx-xxxx
Alyssa.Simon@msvu.ca

Appendix J: Interview Informed Consent**Interview Informed Consent**

Project title: Perceptions of Empathy in Opinion Leadership

You are being invited to take part in the research study named above. It is important that you understand the purpose of this study, how it may affect you, the risks and benefits of taking part, and what you will be asked to do, before you decide if it is in your best interest to take part in the study. You do not have to take part in the study. Taking part is entirely voluntary (your choice). If you have any questions that this form does not answer, the researcher will be happy to give you further information.

The researcher is interested in learning how you understand empathy and its role in organizational communications. The insights gained through this interview will inform a survey that will explore the extent to which organizations are perceived to be empathetic by their internal stakeholders and how this may, in turn, impact organizational influence.

If you agree to enter into this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher about your experiences and views. The interview will be conducted by phone or in-person at a time and place of your convenience. It will consist of questions about the role of empathy and organizational communications. The interview will likely last 20-40 minutes. If you choose to decline participation, confidentiality is assured and the decision to participate (or not) will in no way be shared with others. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The researcher does not anticipate any potential harms from the study. You are free to refuse to answer any question at any time without having to give any reason.

You may experience no direct benefits from participating in the study. However, the knowledge gained from a study may provide a better understanding of online organizational communications and online influence. This may result in improved performance in the area of social media communications at your organization.

Participation in this study is entirely VOLUNTARY. You may withdraw from the study at any point up until or just prior to publication of the findings, approximately April 1, 2017.

Your participation is ANONYMOUS. Although the researcher may be able to identify you, this information will not be shared with your employer. The information you provide us will be stripped of all identifiable data and you will be mentioned only as participant X in any reports. Therefore, no one will know whether or not you have participated in this research.

If you have any questions, please contact me, Alyssa Simon, at (506) xxx-xxxx, Alyssa.Simon@msvu.ca. If you have any questions about how the study is being conducted and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved in the study, you may contact the Chair of the University Research Ethics Board

(UREB) c/o MSVU Research and International Office at (902) 457-6350 or via email at research@msvu.ca.

I acknowledge that I have read and understand the content of this consent form.

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Researcher's Signature:

Date:

A copy of this form will be provided to you for your records.

Appendix K: Interview Audiorecording Consent



Interview Audio-Recording Consent

Project Title: Perceptions of Empathy in Opinion Leadership

This study involves a qualitative in-depth interview which is expected to take 20-40 minutes. During the interview you will be asked open-ended questions about your views and experiences with respect to the role of empathy in organizational communications.

With your permission, this interview will be audio recorded for analysis. The recording will be destroyed following completion of this thesis.

Participant Name: _____

I freely volunteer to take part in this research. The purpose of this study has been explained and I have had a chance to ask questions. I have been provided the contact information for the researcher and university should I have any questions in the future:

Alyssa Simon
(902) 457-5073
(506) xxx-xxxx
Alyssa.Simon@msvu.ca.

Chair of the University Research Ethics Board
c/o MSVU Research and International Office
(902) 457-6350
research@msvu.ca.

I give my permission to be audio taped as described above. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

___ I give you permission to audiotape my interviews.

___ I DO NOT give you permission to audiotape my interviews.

Participant’s Signature:

Date:

Researcher’s Signature:

Date:

A copy of this form will be provided to you for your records.

Appendix L: Interview Protocol**Interview Protocol for Organization Leaders**

Project title: Perceptions of Empathy in Opinion Leadership

INTERVIEW INFORMATION

- Date:
- Time:
- Place:

INTERVIEWEE INFORMATION

- Interviewee's Name:
- Age:
- Sex:
- Place of Work:
- Position:
- Nature of Work:

ICE BREAKERS:

- Could you briefly describe your profession and professional background?
- Do you have regular exposure to organizational communications? In what capacity?
- Could you describe any online interactions you have, or communications you receive, from your employer? (For example, do you follow your employer on social media? Do you receive email correspondence/newsletters from your organization? Etc.)
- What are the most important factors in maintaining a positive organization-stakeholder relationship?

EMPATHY

- Based on your experiences, how would you define empathy?
- What is the role of empathy in communication?
- How important is empathy in interpersonal communications? In organizational communications?
- Do you believe an organization, or person for that matter, that is more empathetic would be more influential? If so, how? If not, why not?

OPINION LEADERSHIP

- Opinion leaders are people or organizations that are able to obtain information from mass media sources and disseminate it to those around them, influencing how those 'followers' interpret and act upon that information. Do you see your place of work as being an opinion leader, or influential in this way? How so?

THE EMPATHETIC ORGANIZATION

- What would an empathetic organization look like to you?
- What characteristics or behaviors make an empathetic organization?
- To what extent do you believe an organization can be truly empathetic?
- Do you believe your organization is, or could be, an empathetic organization?
- What are some of the benefits and challenges organizations could face when trying to be empathetic?
- How does an empathetic organization differ from an empathetic person?
- Do you feel your place of work values – or demonstrates – empathy appropriately?
- How has your organization demonstrated empathy, or compassion, in the past?
- Is there anything else you would like to mention that has not come up in this protocol?

Appendix M: CORE Completion Certificate



Appendix N: Grounded Theory Axial Coding

Section 1: Defining Empathy

How would you define empathy?

What is empathy’s role in communication?

Difference between interpersonal and organizational communications?

Theme	Open Coding
<i>Self-Orientated Experience & Inherent Limitations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience, based on your own experiences, using the self as a reference point (A1) • Putting yourself in someone’s shoes – many went back to this saying, why? (A1) (A9) • Through their eyes – related to someone else's shoes – why is metaphor so prevalent when talking about empathy, perspective taking and a sense of immersion/possession in or of another (B1) • Relate to others’ experiences – self orientated (A5) • Self-orientated – placing yourself in a position (A8) • Empathy has a process – gives example describing progression from initial self-point of view, to self-oriented perspective taking (A9) • Limitation to achieving true understanding, but the effort to try and understand is meaningful; true understanding is not a prerequisite and a limitation to true understanding doesn't delegitimize empathy (A12) • Trying/the attempt of connection is what matters when it comes to empathy (A12) (B1)
<i>Comprehension of Other’s Experience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding – a level of cognition involved, an effort to go beyond the experience itself and interpret (A1) • Putting yourself in someone’s shoes – many went back to this saying, why? (A1) • Connection is achieved via understanding another’s perspective – empathy facilitates connection; empathetic bridge building (A2) • Achieving understanding while holding true to own perspective, without capitulating (A2) • An ability to understand someone’s POV (A2) • Empathy an ability, but with inherent limitations – can only understand someone's point of view to the best of our individual ability (A4) • Empathy is not limited to one type of emotion, but applies equally to wins and hardships (A4) • Empathy is a bridge: facilitating understanding, reducing differences, and exposing similarities between parties (A4) • A critical ability involving aspects of cognition, critical thinking, higher order process (A4) • Understanding – that's shipped from perception to interpretation, hearing to listening (A9) (A12) • Listening – indicates an openness to experiences of others (A9) • Empathy centers on achieving understanding, comprehension (B2)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempt – empathizing as an active attempt to understand what others are going through (B3) • Involves listening, openness and comprehension (C1) (C2) • Understanding others' perspectives – comprehensively (C1) • Empathy as perspective taking – seeing others point of view (A2) • Empathy allows for comprehensive understanding of others, their experiences, challenges, goals (A8)
<i>Physicality of Empathy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There's a physical aspect to empathy, a physiological response (A1)
<i>Burdensome Aspect of Empathy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking on an emotion – there may be something burdensome about empathy (A1) • Taking on feelings – empathy as a burden, a cost-benefit relationship? (B4)
<i>Non-Judgmental</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elimination of personal bias (A1)
<i>Non-Universality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only certain people achieve the 'intelligence' to understand someone else's POV (A2) • Empathy is non-universal – notion that it is not necessary for everyone (A6) • Empathy is not universal – a continuous variable, rather than having or not; some people have more empathy than others (B3) • Empathy is not universally necessary to communicate, communication can be effective when stripped of emotion and information is presented factually and directly (B4)
<i>Value</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value in understanding someone's POV – a benefit to the organization's well-being? (A2) • Empathy allows understanding of others' motivations – strategic value (A2) • To 'appreciate' some of perspective indicates value - is the strategic value, I don't think so in this case, maybe human value (A7)
<i>Facilitates Openness</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging in empathy allows (facilitates) openness to new ideas (A2) • Empathy a mental exercise, practicing openness– practice makes perfect? If the potential for new growth? (A2)
<i>Conceptualization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligence (A2) • Ability (A4) (A8) (A9) (A11) • Empathy as a personality trait – as opposed to an ability, you have to see something that can be learned, or is it inherent? (A6) • Treatment of empathy as a tool, something to routinely attain, a business tool, or a box to take (B1)
<i>Care</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy defined as a sense of care (A6) • Feel for others – caring (B3)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy a manifestation of care, demonstrating care and valuing of others (A7) • Empathy communicates a sense of value or care for others, of particular importance when being called on to be, or act selflessly, more influence and that, through that (A7)
<i>Socio-Cultural Dimension</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy has a strong association with creativity and with nonmainstream groups (including hippies, environmental/social sustainability groups, B. Corps.) (A6) • Empathetic people converge, they are drawn together rather than groups of people become empathetic. This is why some fields are more prophetic than others (A6) • Not solitary, empathy is a social behaviour (A7) • Empathy is personal – there is a level of intimacy, it’s a social mechanism (A10) • Empathy tied to support – social support, social mechanism (A12) • Empathy functions in supporting others, when in good balance (A1) • Empathy is called for, responsibility, do when dealing with people in difficult situations (B2) • Empathy facilitates socially appropriate behaviours (A10) • Quality of life – without empathy, quality-of-life declines (A3)
<i>Origin/Development</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of the facilitated by environment, slightly contradictory to previous statement (A6)
<i>Situation and Context Dependent</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy and situational understanding, is it active? (A7) • Empathy is situational – particular circumstances, setting (A8) (C2) • Empathy is situational, circumstantial and in the moment (A12) • Empathy is situational – you imagine yourself in their situation (B2) • Situational – empathy seems to rise to the forefront when the situation calls for it (B3) • You are better able to provide more you can relate to, relate ability eight empathy (B3) • Empathy influenced by context, harder to develop little information, provides racism as example (A4) • Empathy is aided by shared experiences and relatability (A9) • Empathy is situational (A8) • Empathy is context dependent (A9) • Greater context leads to greater empathy (C1)
<i>Strategic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy allows for anticipation, knowing what to expect (A7) • Empathy and ability to gain or use others' feelings as a resource or consideration for future action or decision making (A11) • Empathy informs responses to others (C1) • When communicating, it's desirable to maintain an ongoing and active awareness of the audience (A11) • Empathy, as a form of information gathering, allows for effective communication, communication that fills identify gaps in audience knowledge (B1) • Empathy aids in information gathering – facilitating understanding of audience needs (B3)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy aims in controlling responsive, strategic and empathetic reasoning, communicating through the most appropriate channels which in turn can avoid conflict (B3) • Empathy facilitates greater understanding of internal and external stakeholders, increasing related ability, conflict avoidance (C1) • There is a level of care that goes into communication, a desire to strike the right note with an audience, identify gaps in stakeholder knowledge, stakeholder wants (C2) • Empathy is understanding the roles of others – goes to knowing environment and what to expect of others (A8) • Difference in tailoring and empathetic approach for individuals or groups – individual needs versus common ground (B4)
<p><i>Rational/Emotional Duality</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding both point of view and feelings, rational and emotional components (A8) • Critical thinking – empathy involves aware, active, even practiced cognition and reasoning (A9) • Feel for them – an emotional component as well as rational (A9) • Empathy is active, requires cognition (B2) • Empathy has an emotional component (B2) • Feelings and thoughts – two components (B3) • Active immersion into the thoughts and feelings of others (B3) • Active cognition and comprehension, interpreting and going beyond; empathy involves cognitive commitment (C2)
<p><i>Communicative Role</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy as tied to communication – its absence disrupts message flow therefore linked to effective message transmission (A10) • Empathy allows for correct interpretation of communication therefore aids both sender and receiver in message transmission, that is communication, gives example of tone and text messaging (A10) • Empathy is one respect for consideration when it comes to communicating or developing communications (B1) • Empathy can allow for clear reception of the message, clarity of communication/message transmission (B1) • Empathy facilitates effective communications, assisting in tailoring of messages to audience (B4) • For communication, ability to respect or explore others' points of view through conversation, but it's challenging (A2) • More empathy is tied to healthier conversations, productive conversations that gain ground – tied to two-way communication (A2) • Communication equated to empathy: empathy and the branch that builds communication, empathy is foundational (A4) • Storytelling can facilitate – a chicken and egg scenario, where communication facilitates empathy and empathy facilitates communication (A4) • Empathy is tied to/facilitates open, effective communication (A5) (A8) • Empathy's role in communication is dependent on the receiver's capacity for empathy and interpretation of the message – related to two-way communication (A6) • Empathy underpins all good communication – it's foundational to effective communication (A8)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy brings a level of intimacy, something personal to communication; empathetic communication is personal (A10) • Empathy aids in decoding and/or interpreting a message (A10) • Listening is key to empathy's role in communication, going beyond perception into interpretation (B3) • Empathy is a communicative process (B3) • empathy allows you to identify what the audience wants to know, enables clear, effective communication (C2)
<i>2-Way Empathy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for reciprocity – ideally, those you have empathy for, will empathize with you, a balance (B3) • Two-way or symmetrical empathy is the best case for facilitating good working relationships, over indulgence and empathy reduces productivity (A1) • Important to achieve a balance, the symmetry or reciprocity of empathy, interesting and symmetrical communication is a homework of excellence, might the same be true for empathy (A3)
<i>Actionable</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy has an action respect – actionable deed can be manifestation of empathy, going beyond an individual experience (B3)
<i>Organizational Empathy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In business, empathy can be polarizing, either very evident or very absent (A1) • Balance – between engaging and empathetic interactions and following company policy, there are boundaries (B3) • Loss of empathy's permission for corporate creed to take over – this is part of the loss of empathy, bad things happen sentiment (A4) • Organizational empathy encompasses both empathizing with the organization itself and its members (A8) • Openness is dependent on the situation; professional context calls for more reservation (A11) • Organizational empathy has constraints; it can be bound by professionalism (A12) • There is an empathy slips in the workplace; constraints on organizational empathy differentiated from personal empathy; empathy can exist in the workplace but there is greater capacity for interpersonal relationships (B3) • Empathy is important in specialized organizational functions (B4)
<i>Organizational Communications</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility to actively engage in empathy when communicating (B1)
<i>Organizational Relationships</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations are run by people – there shouldn't be a difference because it's all personal; There is a difference, but should there be a difference? Ethics and morality of empathy treatment in the workplace (A4) • No difference – best practice in treating external stakeholders like you would internal stakeholders, and internal stakeholders like friends (A5) • Personal relationships stem from social commonalities, they are largely voluntary, more; organizational relationships are less voluntary, more need to tolerate differences and engage in empathy to overcome differences - more distinct, strategic function of empathy and organizational context (A8)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal relationships are voluntary therefore the capacity for empathy has fewer bounds, greater context equals greater empathy; work empathy may be constrained to more situational because of limited context (A9) • It's an exception to the rule that internal stakeholders are treated like friends, prevailing against norms of empathetic context (A12) • Empathetic needs change at the individual level, they are not universal (B4) • Extant desire to bring empathy into both personal and organizational relationships (C2) • Representing an organization at all times – for organizations like the, how to separate personal and professional lives? (C2)
<i>Reducing Conflict</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy reduces tensions – hospital in facilitating or creating conflict resolution (A2) • Empathy enables conflict resolution – through perspective taking that overpowers opposition and laying blame (A5) • Conflict resolution – without empathy bad things happen, communication breaks down, establishing empathy and perspective taking can re-establish order and positivity (A7) • Empathy facilitates communication no way that avoids conflict, that avoids a breakdown of communication (A9) • Empathy aids in navigating situations where there is potential for conflict – deadlines, expectations – maintaining a positive work environment • When communication lacks empathetic input and perspective taking, conflict can arise (B2)

Section 2: Opinion Leadership

Could an empathetic organization be more influential?
 Do you believe your organization is an opinion leader?

Theme	Open Coding
<i>OL & Empathy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy may be a contributing factor, helpful building influence (A1) • The people most likely to be influenced are those that hold those values, is open to other perspectives (A2) • Empathy may impact influence if the audience is open to different perspectives (A2) • Empathy is attractive – people are attracted to care and others, empathy facilitates connections, buy-in, people more willing to invest emotionally and financially (A4) (A5) (A9) (B4) • Empathy strengthens relationships – credibility, reliability, respect and strong relationships drive influence (A5) • Empathy influences influence, a contributing factor (A6) • Empathy can serve to influence people to make good decisions without moving into coercion (A7) • Non-empathetic companies can certainly be successful, see success too (A9)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations going beyond the call of duty resonate, impacts influence (A12) • Organizations are comprised of people with empathy, that knowledge allows for more impact (B1) • Personalization of messages is more impactful (B1) • Empathetic actions can generate influence, ex. charitable actions (B3) • Empathy facilitates greater knowledge of and connection to stakeholders (C1) • OL is community-based, the opinion leader is part of were embedded in a community (A2) (A3) • Feedback, outside perception of the basis for evaluation (A2) • Can focus the attention, the message you get as an opinion leader to build your influence even more (A2) • Perception that having and sharing opinions is or should be a given, given experience with particular subject matter (A2) • Focus should be on exploring and optimizing influence in communities of like-minded people, community focus and priority (A6) • there are circles of influence which vary in size (A7) • Empathy is not necessary to be influential (A7) • Opinion leadership associated with breaking ground in a particular industry (A7) • Fence standing – achieving opinion leadership through openness to various perspectives; specific strategy in place to facilitate opinion leadership, effective opinion leadership (A8) • Striving to be an opinion leader (A9) (B4) • Organizations can draw particular target audiences and build influence among them (cites ‘Millennial Dream’ project) (A11) • Opinion leadership achieved through running, leading, organization with a specific set of goals in mind; achieved through endeavors, specific goals and influencing behaviour (A12) (B1) • Education and communication components to opinion leadership (B1) • Not all organizations strive to be opinion leaders, some just want to get their messages out (B3) • Improved community relationships have led to stronger opinion leadership (B3) • Opinion leadership often dependent on organizational leadership and public facing workers (B3) • The better the public perception, the greater the opinion leadership (B3) • Reliability is tied to opinion leadership (B3) • Strategy for building opinion leadership through relatability and storytelling (C1) (C2) • Opinion leadership stems from a desire to share her point of view with an audience (C2)
<p><i>Situational</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entities tied to influence dependent on circumstances, situational (A7) • Dependent on circumstances – organization in the industry, empathy is situational (A9) (A11) (C2) • Opinion leadership can be a positive or negative distinction (A3) (A12) • Opinion leadership dependent on situation, sometimes there is flexibility for opinions and sometimes there is not, ex. accounting (A5)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities to be an opinion leader case or situation-dependent; opinion leadership can sometimes be usurped by loss of message control, especially online (C1)
<i>Reciprocity</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance – ‘if you are good to your stakeholders, they’ll be good to you’ philosophy, better to strike a balance than to be overly empathetic (A1) • Openness of audience – you will have greater influence on an empathetic route, notion that it takes empathy to no empathy i.e. preaching to the choir (A6) • Empathy can function reciprocally, 2-way– people perceive it and are drawn to respond; influences public perception of positive way (A10)
<i>Impact of Empathy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy as new to business, introduced by the courts, sustainability movements and the like (A6) • Empathy communicates a sense of value or care for others, of particular importance when being called on to be, or act selflessly, more influence and that, through that (A7) • Empathy can be part of the organizational identity (A11)
<i>Empathetic Organizations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running business with positive output and positive society often takes empathetic people (A8) • Empathy supports purpose driven organization behaviour (A8) • Balance – managing benefit accompanying to community (A8) • Ideal versus reality – are things as they are as they really should be? Are empathetic organizations something to fight for? (A9) • There are limits to organizational empathy (B3) • Organizational empathy can be difficult, is there a cost? Is it worth it? (B4)
<i>Separation of Personal/ Organizational OL</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OL as a person, an organization leader; positioning self (self-accessed) as a leader in a specific area; separation of the leader's personal brand from the company brand can occur (ex. Elon Musk, Greg Hemmings) (A1) (A2) (A7) (A10) (A12) • OL as an organization, brand, collective (A2) (A10)
<i>OL Niche</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific area of OL (A1) (A2) (A10) • The perception as being a subject matter expert in a specific field can differ from actually being an opinion leader (B2)
<i>Constraints</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational opinion leadership can be constrained, from reaching full potential by business needs; though these constraints slow progress, organization can still move ahead (A9) (A12)

Section 3: Empathetic Organizations

- What does an empathetic organization look like to you?
- What are the key characteristics?
- To what extent can an organization be truly empathetic?
- Is your organization empathetic?
- Benefits and challenges?

Theme	Open Coding
<i>Business Performance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An empathetic organization is one that performs well in the business side (A4)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathetic organizations have measurable impact (A7) • Empathetic organization remains a practical, functioning organization (A9)
<i>Respect</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for stakeholders, shift occurring towards greater organizational respect for stakeholders, but remains industry and size –dependent (A1) • Organization members respect the values and membership of other members (A4) • Staff cohesion: agreement is not necessary to function if there is respect (A4)
<i>Freedom to Contribute & Acknowledgement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to ask questions and be heard (A11) • Everyone feels to have a voice and are valued (A2) (A3) • Sense of member fulfillment, and acknowledgement and unity (A2) • Organization members have the ability to respectfully argue (A2) • Organization acknowledges participation and contribution of ideas that enhance productivity (A7) • Organization acknowledges stakeholders’ points of view (A2) • Acceptance of differences of opinions and moving forward despite, this is characteristic of empathetic organizations (A9) • Desire to foster open relationships, where members feel free to speak out (A5) • Organization values its stakeholders (A11) • Empathetic organization listens to and acknowledges individual's concerns (B4) (C2) • Empathetic organizations characterized by openness to voices, contributions, ideas (B1)
<i>Communication</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It communicates organizational goals and behaviours when engaging with stakeholders (B3) • Commitment to transparency, openness; open to new ideas (A11) (B3) (A5) • Clear, honest communication that results in productivity, moving forward (A9) • Message and organizational consistency is necessary for empathetic organizations to ‘practice what they preach’ (A6) • Communication plays a vital role particularly in conflict (A11) • Committed to diplomacy, a major factor of empathy, factors into the tailoring of communications and responses to stakeholders (B4) • Communications need to be aligned/representative of their organizations (B1) • Empathetic organizations characterized by personal, consistent communication efforts (B1) • Tailoring messages and communications both to individuals and to mass audiences is a sign of an empathetic organization (B4)
<i>Perspective-Taking</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement and perspective taking, necessary for an empathetic organization (B1) (A1) (C2) • Organization is interested in understanding its stakeholders’ experiences, needs and wants (B3) • Empathetic organizations strive to create an environment suited to the needs of working style of its employees (A12)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding work life balance; empathetic organization has an understanding of work life balance and its challenges (A12) (A10) • Attempting, actively, to engage in perspective taking; organization engages in conscious perspective taking (A9) (A11) • Organization consider stakeholder needs, meet them and foster enjoyable relationships (A7) • Empathetic organizations take into account the context, environment, surrounding the business (A8) • Organization open to other worldviews, without judgment (A4) • Organization is aware of surroundings (A7) (C1) • Organization's understanding of stakeholder needs, particularly work life balance (A12)
<i>Actionable Outcomes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations demonstrate commitment to empathy through action (B3) • Organization actively looks for ways to benefit the community (B3) • Learns from past experiences to improve future experiences, allowing for growth (A7) • Empathy can be there in terms of understanding other perspectives, but you have to go further into discussing those multiple views and ending up with something actionable (A2)
<i>Business Models Supporting Empathetic Organizations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • B Corp. and circular business model cited as extant model structures that support empathetic cultures (A6) • Triple bottom line companies as example structure that can support empathetic cultures (A8) • Empathetic organizations linked to purpose driven organizations (A8) • Empathetic organization could be a response to the movement exploring why people work, the driver purpose and pleasure in the workplace (A6) • Establishment of empathetic culture is dependent upon the organization structure (A12)
<i>Sustainability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organization tied to sustainability, sustainability is desirable (A6) • Sustainability linked to empathetic organizations, without sustainability, bad things happen (A8) • Empathetic organizations both understand and build for, or into, the social landscape (A8) • Communicating, taking an interest in things that the community, environment, is interested in; sustainability initiatives and planning (B1) • Organization makes commitment to social, environmental responsibility (A10)
<i>Balance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership actively balances the willingness to give feedback with willingness to receive feedback; two-way communication, respect (A9) • Balance: if stakeholders are buying into an organization, the organization should work for them (A1) • Maintain a balance: trust and respect members but also hold accountable (A10) • Empathetic organization balances positive, open culture with meeting business and productivity goals (A12) • Organization invests and cares about stakeholders (B2)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is an emotional investment among members (A5) • Balance: treats others like you want to be treated (A11) • Empathetic organization is characterized by combined empathy and business interests (A5) • Balance, to be truly empathetic, there have to be boundaries (A12) • Maintaining empathy balance (B2) • Being overly empathetic can be problematic (A1) • Balancing empathy with strategic business needs (B1) • Finding the balance between lack and overabundance of empathy (B4)
<i>Legitimacy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization must achieve balance, two-way empathy (A1) • Truly achieved when organizational people truly working towards a common goal; this involves engaging in debates with various points of view and understanding/openness to new ideas (A2) • Contingent on whether there is empathy while business goals/interests are being met (A4) • Capacity for organization to be truly empathetic contingent on organization members' interpersonal relationships and individual capacity for empathy (A7) • Organizations are truly empathetic if involved in the community, local community particularly (B3) (B3) • To be truly empathetic, the organization has to be consistent; there is always for improvement (B2) (B3)
<i>Leadership: People and Policy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy is a top-down, leadership function in the workplace (A11) • Make commitments to a culture of empathy at both personal – among members – and policy levels (A7) • Organization makes decisions based on love not greed; an empathetic organization makes up the foundation of a love economy (A4) • Support for empathetic culture, which can be top-down or bottom-up (A1) • Strong leadership, trustworthy who gives autonomy (A3) • reliance on empathetic leadership, top-down organizational culture; leadership capacity for empathy needs to align with the organization empathetic culture (A8) • Empathetic organizations commitments are written into organization policies, and values, central and essential to organization (A10) • Organizational leadership engages in management listening, is open to new ideas and contributions (B1) • Because organizations are comprised of people, the most an organization as an entity can do is encourage empathy through policies (A7) • Empathy is a top-down strategic decision (A9) • Empathy a leader driven organizational culture (A2) (A12) • Empathetic culture begins at the organization's core: values, goals, mission, strategic direction, etc. (C2)
<i>Constraints of Empathy in Organizations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization engages in perspective taking but with boundaries, allowing multiple voices but arriving actionable decisions and goals at the end of the day (A2) • Organizational empathy contingent on member's capacity for empathy; however, empathetic culture can rub off on individuals (A8)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are constraints on organizational empathy (B2) • Organizational empathy has boundaries: acknowledging others' points of view while prioritizing business goals (B4) • Organizations are only as empathetic as their individual members are capable of being (C2)
<i>Benefits of Implementing Cultures of Empathy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standing as an empathetic organization can be beneficial when things go wrong (B1) • Improved stakeholder relations with respect (C1)
<i>Challenges to Implementing Cultures of Empathy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture of empathy can be difficult to maintain as an organization grows; easier to attain in a smaller organization, harder to protect of the company grows; easier to achieve empathetic culture in a smaller organization (A4) (A9) (A10) (A11) (A12)) (A11) • Organizations being able to empathize with stakeholders when things go wrong without unjustly accepting legal blame; this can be very effective in reducing tensions (compared to cold hearted denial) (A7) • It's asking a lot of the organization's people; you need to take into account that people often have agendas of their own (A2) • There is a cost to empathetic culture (A9) • Challenge to empathetic organizational legitimacy comes from reconciling large number of viewpoints and experiences; the best interests of everyone involved will not always online (A10) • Uncertainty as to how organizations establish cultures of empathy (C1) • Challenge: bringing stakeholders on board and motivating them to engage in a level perspective taking that meets the organizational culture (A8) • Challenge: being constantly aware of and assessing relationships with multiple stakeholder groups (A8) • Challenge: an empathetic organization has to be maintained, making the effort to do so has the meaning (A9) • Capacity of the organization's people to be empathetic will vary with individuals, not everyone will be on the same page (A9) • There can be a financial cost to being empathetic (A12) • Achieving a balance of two way empathy; reconciling the different people in the organization may have different capacities for empathy (A1) • Understanding and accommodating work life balance (A1) • Individual personality fit in an empathetic culture (A3) • Financial cost of investing in the cultures (A4) • Productivity cost; potential to view empathetic culture has permission to be less productive (A5) • Organizational consistency – internal and external messaging need to align, if not you're talking the talk, not walking the walk (A6) • Challenge: bringing a culture of empathy into corporate cultures dominated by legalese – i.e. protecting the organization minutes, for while being empathetic (A7) • Challenge: learning to be empathetic as an organization, a trial and error process of establishing a culture of empathy, takes time to get it right (A7)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of empathy and whether it is worth it when there are highly successful organizations that are not empathetic (A7) • Challenge of exposing or explaining to employees the big picture rationale for adopting a particular set of beliefs or culture in an organization, place an organization can impact openness to empathetic culture (A8) • Empathy is time-consuming, there is a time cost (A11) • Empathy can be stressful, problematic taking on another's problem, burdensome (A11) • Potential financial cost due to rejecting potential clients/opportunities because of certain values (A12) • Trendiness of positive organizational cultures make it difficult to judge authenticity (A12) • Challenge: learning how/to what extent and when to act empathetically; understanding how empathetic culture operates (B1) • How to implement an empathetic organizational culture (C1) • Conflicting drives for empathy and profit; and reconciling the business model (C2)
<p><i>Outcomes of Empathetic Organizations</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathetic organizations facilitate openness to new ideas and new solutions to problem (A2) • Workplace empathy positively impacts work environment (A5) • Belief that empathy is beneficial to the organization (A9) • Empathetic organizations facilitate productivity (A12) • Empathetic organizations are more compelling to stakeholders, allowing for more brand personality (A8) • Authenticity and commitments is often apparent to audiences; truly empathetic organizations operate with inconsistent, unified visions that aim to benefit society (A8) • Status of that organization can be indicated by personal impressions imparted by organization members (A11) • Status is empathetic organization can be indicated by products or services (A12)
<p><i>Organizational Empathy Vs. Personal Empathy</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers affecting organizational empathy differentiated from personal empathy, i.e. empathetic people (B1) • Empathetic organization is comprised of empathetic people; an organization is comprised of people who may or may not be empathetic (A1) (A6) (A7) • More support can be found in an empathetic organization (A3) • Empathetic person has a simpler existence (A5) • Empathy can be an organizational value, but an organization cannot be empathetic (A7) • An organization has greater resources, human and financial, that impact organizational culture; greater collaboration and organization (A8) • organization has the numbers, the population rather than individual values, issues, actions (A9) • Organization has to differentiate between its very stakeholders and understand how it's impacting community (A10) • Organization has to marry, balanced, empathetic and business functions (A12)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization and individual empathy shouldn't differ, to be empathetic is to be fundamentally human; an organization is empathetic because there are people in the organization communicating with stakeholders and publics (B1) • an individual has more freedom to be empathetic, an organization is more constrained, having to operate according to rules and guidelines (B2) (B3) (B4) • People and organizations are not all empathetic to the same degree, there is variance (C1) • Organization is the sum of its people, empathetic based on their capacity for empathy (C2)
<i>Desirability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy contributes to this ideal organization, but it is not the only factor (A2) • Drive to move toward being an empathetic organization (A9) • Organizations should strive to be empathetic (C1)
<i>Additional Characteristics</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical thinking and kindness key to empathetic organizations (A9) • Organization engages in broad spectrum empathy (A1) • Organization characterized by creative, cohesive collaboration (A3) (A9) • Organization committed to being accountable for wrongs (cited liability denial trend) (A7) • Organization openness and flexibility (A10) (A12) • Organization cares about its stakeholders, a culture of kindness (A10) • Organization cares for stakeholders, evidenced through support for well-being (A12) • Empathetic organizations are giving, charitable (C1) • Successful empathetic organizations are driven by a number of factors, not just the presence of empathy (A2) • Empathetic organizations look to be fair with all parties (A4) • Empathy manifests in both the organization's brand and people; both are possible (A9)

Appendix O: Final List of Emergent Themes

- Defining Empathy
 - Comprehension of Others' Experiences
 - Conceptualization
 - Self-Orientated Experience and Inherent Limitations
 - Rational-Emotional Duality
 - Physicality of Empathy
 - Socio-Cultural Aspects of Empathy
 - Non-Universality
 - Origin and Development
 - Situation and Context-Dependent
 - Empathy as Burden
 - Empathy as Care
 - Strategic Aspects of Empathy
 - Value
 - Reducing Conflict
 - Facilitating Openness
 - Actionable
 - Communicative Role
 - Organizational Empathy
 - Organizational Communication
 - Organizational Relationships
 - Two-Way Empathy
- Empathy and Opinion Leadership
 - Situation Dependent
 - Separation of Personal/Organizational OL
 - Opinion Leadership Niche
 - Constraints on OL
 - Impact of Empathy
 - Reciprocity
 - Empathetic Organizations
- The Empathetic Organization
 - Characteristics of Empathetic Organizations
 - Perspective-Taking
 - Respect
 - Freedom to Contribute and Acknowledgement
 - Additional Characteristics
 - Sustainability
 - Actionable Outcomes
 - Business Performance
 - Leadership, People and Policy
 - Balance
 - Communication Role
 - Desirability
 - Legitimacy of Empathetic Organizations
 - Constraints of Empathy in Organizations
 - Benefits of Implementing Cultures of Empathy
 - Outcomes of Empathetic Organizations

- Challenges of Implementing Cultures of Empathy
- Differentiating Organizational Empathy

Appendix P: Survey Item Mean Scores

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
What_is_your_preferred_gender_identity?	28	1	3	1.75	.645
How_did_you_hear_about_this_survey?	29	1	4	1.79	1.048
G. Which_of_the_following_organizations_do_you_work_for?	29	1	3	2.14	.639
How_long_have_you_worked_at_the_organization?	27	2	6	3.63	1.621
Which_best_describes_your_role_in_the_organization?	29	1	5	3.66	1.396
[The_organization_is_dependent_on_advice_from_its_stakeholders,_rather_than_a_provider_of_advice (R).]	29	1	7	3.83	1.416
[Workplace_empathy_and_personal_empathy_are_the_same_thing (R).]	29	1	7	3.86	1.620
[My_organization_shares_content_on_social_media_that_stands_up_for_people_that_are_being_taken_advantage_of.]	27	1	7	4.04	1.605
[My_organization_often_shares_its_opinion/viewpoints_on_relevant_issues_via_social_media/Internet/email.]	28	2	6	4.43	1.317
[I_often_look_to_my_organization_as_a_source_of_advice,_not_just_direction.]	29	2	7	4.45	1.502

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
[I believe that when my organization communicates via the Internet/social media, it reaches a large number of people.]	29	2	7	5.00	1.225
[My organization stands up for people that are being taken advantage of.]	28	2	7	5.04	1.503
[My organization engages in conversations with its followers on social media to better understand where they're coming from.]	29	2	7	5.10	1.319
[I follow/friend my organization on social media.]	29	1	7	5.17	1.891
[I believe an organization can be truly empathetic.]	29	2	7	5.28	1.192
[My place of work tries to look at both sides of a question before coming up with a solution.]	29	2	7	5.31	1.285
[My organization shares heartwarming messages in its online communications.]	29	2	7	5.31	1.538
[When the organization communicates via social media, it gives a great deal of information.]	29	3	7	5.31	1.004
[When the organization communicates via social media, it gives very little information (R).]	29	2	7	5.31	1.491

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
[Compared_to_other_organizations, _my_place_of_work_tries_to_understand_its_employees/stakeholders/followers_better_by_imagining_how_things_look_from_their_perspectives.]	29	3	7	5.41	1.119
[I_trust_my_organization.]	29	2	7	5.45	1.325
[During_the_past_6_months_the_organization_has_been_particularly_active_on_its_social_media_profiles.]	29	3	7	5.45	1.152
[I_consider_my_organization_to_be_influential.]	29	3	7	5.48	1.271
[I_am_touched_by_things_I_see_happening_in_my_organization.]	29	2	7	5.48	1.405
[I_consider_the_communications_shared_by_my_organization_to_be_valuable_and_interesting]	29	4	7	5.48	.949
[My_organization_shows_tender, _concerned_feelings_for_less_fortunate_persons.]	29	3	7	5.55	1.404
[I_consider_my_organization_to_be_well_informed.]	29	3	7	5.62	1.015
[My_organization_respects_me.]	29	2	7	5.66	1.233
[I_am_happy_where_I_work.]	29	2	7	5.69	1.285
[Compared_to_other_organizations, _my_place_of_work_shares_useful_and_relevant_information_in_its_online_communications_(social_media,_Internet,_email,_etc.)]	29	4	7	5.69	.891

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
[I_identify_with_the_values_my_organization_represents.]	29	3	7	5.72	1.192
[My_organization_engages_in_perspective-taking_in_its_online_communications_(social_media,_Internet,_email).]	28	2	7	5.75	1.143
[My_organization_shows_concern_for_others_in_its_online_communications.]	29	4	7	5.76	.988
[My_organization_is_not_compassionate (R).]	29	3	7	5.76	1.215
[My_organization_is_patient_with_me.]	29	4	7	5.76	.951
[I_am_patient_with_my_organization.]	29	4	7	5.79	.819
[I_would_like_to_work_for_an_empathetic_organization.]	29	4	7	5.79	1.082
[In_general,_my_organization_(my_place_of_work)_is_active_on_social_media/the_Internet.]	29	4	7	5.83	.889
[My_organization_cares_about_me.]	28	3	7	5.96	.962
[My_organization_trusts_me.]	29	4	7	5.97	.731
[I_respect_my_organization.]	29	2	7	5.97	1.117
[My_organization_supports,_or_advocates_charitable_causes_in_its_online_communications.]	29	4	7	6.03	.981
[I_do_not_believe_my_organization_is_charitable (R).]	29	4	7	6.41	.825
What_is_your_age?	28	2	11	6.71	3.041
Valid N (listwise)	23				

Appendix Q: Factor Analysis of Scale

Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
[My_organization_cares_about_me.]	.874			
[My_organization_engages_in_perspective-taking_in_its_online_communications_(social_media,_Internet,_email).]		.832		
[My_organization_shows_concern_for_others_in_its_online_communications.]	.500	.547		
[Compared_to_other_organizations,_my_place_of_work_tries_to_understand_its_employees/stakeholders/followers_better_by_imagining_how_things_look_from_their_perspectives.]	.785			
[My_place_of_work_tries_to_look_at_both_sides_of_a_question_before_coming_up_with_a_solution.]	.605		.477	
[My_organization_is_not_compassionate (R).]	.735	.462		

Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
[My_organization_stands_up_for_people_that_are_being_taken_advantage_of.]	.721			.483
[My_organization_shares_content_on_social_media_that_stands_up_for_people_that_are_being_taken_advantage_of.]				.943
[My_organization_shows_tender,_concerned_feelings_for_less_fortunate_persons.]	.454		.732	
[My_organization_supports,_campaigns_for,_or_advocates_charitable_causes_in_its_online_communications.]			.875	
[I_do_not_believe_my_organization_is_charitable (R).]	.437	.569	.493	
[I_am_touched_by_things_I_see_happening_in_my_organization.]	.459	.601	.438	
[My_organization_shares_heartwarming_messages_in_its_online_communications.]		.634		.483
[My_organization_engages_in_conversations_with_its_followers_on_social_media_to_better_understand_where_they're_coming_from.]		.495	.453	.498

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 10 iterations.

Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component		
	1	2	3
[In general, my organization (my place of work) is active on social media/the Internet.]	.838		
[When the organization communicates via social media, it gives a great deal of information.]	.784	.409	
[During the past 6 months the organization has been particularly active on its social media profiles.]	.816		
[Compared to other organizations, my place of work shares useful and relevant information in its online communications (social media, Internet, email, etc.)]	.867		
[I consider the communications shared by my organization to be valuable and interesting]	.591	.553	

Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component		
	1	2	3
[My_organization_often_shares_its_opinion/viewpoints_on_relevant_issues_via_social_media/Internet/email.]		.919	
[I_often_look_to_my_organization_as_a_source_of_advice,_not_just_direction.]	.484	.713	
[I_identify_with_the_values_my_organization_represents.]	.550		.606
[I_consider_my_organization_to_be_influential.]	.531		.589
[I_consider_my_organization_to_be_well_informed.]	.608		
[I_follow/friend_my_organization_on_social_media.]		.418	.610
[When_the_organization_communicates_via_social_media,_it_gives_very_little_information (R).]	.811		
[I_believe_that_when_my_organization_communicates_via_the_Internet/social_media,_it_reaches_a_large_number_of_people.]		.790	
[The_organization_is_dependent_on_advice_from_its_stakeholders,_rather_than_a_provider_of_advice (R).]			-.743

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
 Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Appendix R: Reliability Statistics

Empathy Scale

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.909	.915	14

Opinion Leadership Scale

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.882	.904	14

