

## Exploring the Role of Ventriloquism in Warranting Organizational Perceptions: Sponsored Content for Dummies

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### Abstract

This research looks at sponsored content through the lens of warranting theory. Brands often engage in activities to influence and affect others' statements about them. These activities—specifically organizations' use of sponsored content and promotions—enable exploring previously-untested components of warranting theory. An experiment exposed  $N = 91$  college-aged individuals to an online tweet about a restaurant made either by the organization itself (first party), an unassociated individual (third party), or an individual indicating their post was an advertisement sponsored by the organization (external ventriloquism, "puppet," or "dummy"). Findings reveal both the claimant and the warranting value of the claim affected perceptions of the restaurant's quality; but warranting value did not differ among message posters, and thus did not mediate the relationship between poster and offline perceptions. Findings are discussed with respect to warranting theory and for practitioners.

*Keywords:* Sponsorship; Ad; Identity; Social Media; Influencer;

Through social media, many sources can make claims—potentially accessible to a wide and diverse audience—about a target (Walther & Jang, 2012). For example, in addition to a business making online claims about itself and its wares, so too can competitors, suppliers, customers, potential customers, and even bored non-stakeholders (i.e., trolls). Further complicating this cacophony of claims, organizations are increasingly paying individuals to promote or otherwise speak well of those organizations through paid reviews, influencers, or sponsored content (Yao et al., 2017). By collaborating with individuals, organizations can engage in ventriloquism, using the third party to communicate with external audiences, thereby collapsing the distinction between the organization and independent third parties. How, amid this cacophony of claims, do perceivers then make sense of that business' actual characteristics? The present work draws on warranting theory and the framework of organizational ventriloquism to help explain how these various information sources can affect a claim, specifically considering how online claims by various sources impact perceptions of a restaurant's offline qualities.

## Review of Literature

### Warranting

Warranting refers to the connection between an online claim and an offline self (Walther & Parks, 2002). Online, communicators have greater opportunities for selective self-presentation that may or may not reflect their offline self and characteristics. DeAndrea (2014) noted that *warrants* are cues that serve as a connection between an online presentation and the offline self (e.g., impression formation) and “legitimize information online because they provide insight about the information’s warranting value,” (p. 186). *Warranting value* refers to, “perceptions about the extent to which information is immune to manipulation by the source it describes,” (DeAndrea, 2014, p. 186). Warrants thus possess warranting value, so that cues with greater warranting value can be said to more strongly indicate that the offline target possesses the characteristics claimed online. Prior work has well-established that online claims by and about a target can affect perceivers’ impressions of that target’s offline characteristics (Carr, 2019; Lane et al., 2023; Peterson & High, 2021). Thus, online claims about a corporeal target can influence perceivers’ beliefs in that target’s offline attributes and characteristics.

### Warranting Brand Identity

Warranting theory was initially developed and tested in interpersonal contexts, but has since been extended to explore how organizational identities are established and maintained via media channels (e.g., Carr, 2019). Organizational image management forms the foundation for brand identity building and provides opportunities for consumers to connect with a company. *Brand identity* is a set of brand vision, associations, and relationships inside and outside the company, which create the personality of an organization (De Chernatony, 1999; Lee & Watkins, 2016). Even though the brand does not speak for itself, its representatives—both employees and stakeholders—communicate on behalf of the brand.

Examining the influence of different message sources on celebrity credibility perception, Jin and Muqaddam (2019) claimed consumers perceive influencers’ posts about a product more positively and indicate higher corporate credibility than product-only posts (see also Johnson et al., 2019). Hence, by using influencers as stakeholders for identity formation, impressions of the brand are formed by the third-party product/service claims as well as perceptions of the influencer themselves. Thus, a claim’s source is one of the most vociferously-studied elements affecting a warrant’s warranting value and subsequent impression formation value.

### Effect of Information Source

Given the myriad voices on social media making online claims about an organization, it is important to understand how various sources can disparately affect impressions formed of the organization, even when those disparate voices communicate the same message. Consequently, we consider the effect of information source—a form of warrant—on impression formation. Specifically, we follow recent work (e.g., Brathwaite & DeAndrea, 2022; Johnson et al., 2019) by considering the effect of self-claims (i.e., first-person), claims by unaffiliated others (i.e., third person), and claims by third parties that are influenced by the target (i.e., ventriloquism).

### *First- v. Third-Person Claim*

Early work into warranting empirically supports that the source of a claim substantively affects the resultant impression. For example, Walther et al. (2009) found others' statements of a target's extraversion and physical attractiveness overrode the effect of self-claims. Similarly, Jin (2018) found that peer-generated endorsements have higher persuasive power than celebrities' self-endorsements when promoting products or films on Facebook. Taken together, these findings indicate third-party claims should serve as stronger impression-formation warrants than first-party (i.e., self) claims, having greater impact on the belief a target possesses the espoused characteristic. Formally:

*H1: Third-party claims result in stronger perceptions that a target possesses a given characteristic offline than first-party claims.*

Our first hypothesis replicates prior findings and serves as a baseline against which to contrast subsequent hypotheses. However, it is also of interest to consider the nature of various third parties making claims about a target, particularly amid a rise of paid promotions, sponsorships, and crowdturfing. To help understand potential disparities in third parties making claims online about a target, we leverage Cooren's (2000; 2020) concept of organizational ventriloquism given the potential distances between the organization itself and the third party.

### *Ventriloquism*

An organization itself does not communicate. Rather, an organization is made up of communication by others (Taylor & Cooren, 1997) and is thereby made to have a voice through other figures or persons. The communicative constitution of organization (CCO) approach parallels this idea to suggest that an organization exists by way of communication rather than communication being an occurrence of an organization (Cooren, 2000). That is, an organization communicates—and exists—by way of others' voices. Derived from a metaphorical inference from the word ventriloquism, which explains the act of speaking through or making one's voice appear to originate from something else (such as a puppet), Cooren (2016) noted that *organizational ventriloquism* occurs when someone makes the organization say something or gives it agency or voice by articulating on its behalf. Taylor et al. (1996), noted ventriloquism can manifest as various levels of *distanciation*: the degree of separation between the original speaker and the ultimate message via its transformation into text. For example, those voices may be the organization's products, documents, principles, rules, traditions, and even official representatives of the organization such as staff (Cooren, 2010; 2020). When an organization's president, press secretary, or PR representative speaks on behalf of the organization, they help create the reality and perceptions of their organization, and reflect messages and texts more immediate to the that are closer to the organization and thus reflect a lower level of distanciation. In such instances, the COO approach considers the organizational representative as a *dummy* (extending the metaphor to the ventriloquist's puppet), as they are animated and act on behalf of the disembodied (and thus unable to communicate for itself) organization (Nathues & van Vuuren, 2022). However, organizations may also induce outside parties, animating them to speak on the organizations' behalf.

In this work, we focus on a specific type of organizational ventriloquism, which we term *external dummies*. Herein, we novelly conceptualize *external dummies* as third parties contracted by or enticed by the organization to speak on its behalf but not in its name, resulting in the appearance of some autonomy or agency beyond which an official organizational agent may exercise. Relevant here, external dummies represent a greater level of distancing from the organization, are more distal from the authorship and purposes of the organization as a whole. This conceptualization helps distinguish external dummies from what could be considered *internal dummies*, which might be members of the organization (e.g., president, spokesperson) speaking or acting directly in its name and less-distanced than outside third parties acting on behalf of the organization but not speaking in its name. Several types of external dummies can exist, from native advertising to paid sponsorship or endorsements, to ‘influencers’ (Johnson et al., 2019). These third parties are able to speak in a different tone and with a different voice than organizational members in their official capacity (e.g., a company spokesperson or official quarterly earnings report). Drenten and Psarras (in press) noted that online—especially in social media—the voices portrayed are often disassociated from their origin, allowing a distancing between the message and the actual message source. Ventriloquism can thus serve a masking function, whereby an organization “masks its own influence over the spaces and conditions for voice,” (Bsumek et al., 2014, p. 2). To the end that organizations may exist through communication by others (Cooren, 2000; Taylor & Cooren, 1997) including outside parties, it follows that organizations may desire to leverage third parties to speak for them as an act of ventriloquism. In another form, this is increasingly manifest as paid influencers and promotions.

**Influencers as External Dummies.** Increasing utility of the internet has changed the way companies advertise and communicate to construct their identities offline. Several inquiries about how paid advertisements on social media impact perceptions of organizations have emerged (Barreto, 2013; de Oliveira & Goussevskaia, 2020; Huang & Depari, 2021). One concern has been how organizations communicate directly, either through their own statements on social media or via algorithmically-generated messaging: Because new media have the ability to gather so much data on their users, organizations that use them can make much more intentional and targeted advertisements (de Oliveira & Goussevskaia, 2020), potentially creating, “a unique opportunity for customized and personalized interaction between both parties” (Barreto, 2013, p. 126). Another line of inquiry has been the influence of native advertising, which attempts to minimize disruption to the consumer’s online navigation (Campbell & Marks, 2015). Campbell and Marks also argued that well-produced native advertisements may intrigue consumers to learn more about the advertisement without producing negative effects. One such form of native advertising is organizations’ contracting of individuals to promote or endorse their business, particularly as third parties can help reduce consumers’ doubt and risk perception of the consumer product situation (Dean & Biswas, 2001).

Paid promotions and endorsements by individuals (i.e., external dummies) can have more impact on consumers’ perceptions and behaviors than other pub-

licity or advertising, often because they can both circumvent screening or coping mechanisms individuals use when consuming traditional advertising messages and because users may perceive themselves more homophilous to other users than to brands or organizations (Mayrhofer et al., 2020). These influential third parties can be celebrities or other high-exposure influencers with wide followings (see Abidin, 2015), but increasingly may also be micro-influencers with small or niche followings. Perhaps because influencers who endorse several products are less credible than those who only endorse a single product (Silvera & Austad, 2004), recent work has identified that claims by micro-influencers can result in higher attitudes and purchase intentions than claims by macro-influencers (Kay et al., 2020).

**External Dummies as Warrants.** Previous literature has typically understood a ‘third party’ to be an individual unaffiliated with the target, such as consumers reviewing purchased goods/services, employees discussing an employer, or diners making claims about a restaurant (e.g., DeAndrea et al., 2018). However, not much is known about the warranting value of a claim made by a first-party *through* a third party—that is, as an act of ventriloquism via an external dummy (Christensen & Christensen, 2022a). This understated tether between an independent third party and a third party influenced by the organization led Christensen and Christensen (2022b) to raise concerns about how such ventriloquism can affect warranting, as learning that the voice of a third party (typically presumed to provide messages immune to manipulation or influence by the organization, and thus high in warranting value) is controlled by the organization may affect resultant perceptions.

As described in the prior subsection, external dummies are increasingly sought and compensated by an organization to communicate on their behalf via social media. Thus, unlike unaffiliated third parties whose statements are not manipulated or otherwise controllable by the target of those statements, external dummies enlisted by the target can have their claims affected by the target, and as such function as digital ventriloquism whereby the external dummy’s statements are manipulated and incentivized by and on behalf of the target. For example, when a company pays an influencer to present and flatter their product, though the particular verbiage and tone may be selected by the influencer, the sponsoring company establishes the underlying message (i.e., a positive product recommendation).

Research into the effects of digital ventriloquism is beginning to emerge, including recent research into the use of paid celebrity statements (via the Cameo service) about an individual (Drenten & Psarras, in press). Notably, the use of the Cameo service to hire celebrities to create interpersonal messages needs not be disclosed: You can contract *Star Trek* actor Brent Spiner for US\$300 to create a video telling everyone you and he are close friends, to be shared with all of your social media contacts. Legally and ethically, however, the influence of a third party by an organization for promotional purposes should be more obvious, such as when a promoted post is labeled #ad or #sponsored (Klein et al., 2020; Wellman et al., 2020). In this way, the role of an external dummy third party—and thus the ability of the target to control or influence the contents of claims about itself—should have weaker effects. In other words, when a third party is not perceived as unbiased, such as when it is noted or inferred the external dummy is acting on behalf

of the target, the claims of the third party should have less impression-formation value than an independent third-party claim.

*H2: External dummy claims result in reduced perception a target possesses a given characteristic offline than third-party claims.*

And yet, unlike self-claims, a target may not be able to fully-manipulate the statements made by an external dummy. For example, influencers are best when they speak in their own voice, and thus may adjust verbiage provided by the sponsoring organization to fit their personality or presentation style (Drenten & Psarras, in press). Alternatively, there are some claims influencers will not make, either because such claims would violate ethical/legal standards or because they may negatively impact audiences' perceptions of their authenticity (see Audrezet et al., 2020). Returning to the example, Brent Spiner may say you are friends, but will not falsely claim you were the inspiration for his character, Data. Though ventriloquism may indicate the target has some influence over the claim, and is thus a lesser warrant than independent third-party claims, the external dummy still maintains nominal control over their persona. Thus, their claims are more immune to influence than claims by the organization directly. We therefore expect stronger impression-formation value (i.e., warrants) from external dummy claims than organizational claims.

*H3: First-party claims result in reduced perception a target possesses a given characteristic offline than an external dummy's claims.*

### **Role of Warranting Value**

In addition to a direct effect on the perceptions of a claim, the source of a claim should also affect the perceived warranting value of that claim. As Walther et al. (2009) noted, "The warranting principle predicts that users attach greater credence to information that is immune to a target's manipulation—in this case, friends' wall postings—compared to targets' self-descriptions" (p. 247). In other words, as the target of the claim is less able to affect the claim made, claims are less likely to be manifestations of selective self-presentation of an idealized self and thus possess greater warranting value. The literature has generally been consistent with this view, suggesting the source of an online claim influences the warranting value an audience attaches to that claim (DeAndrea, 2014; Hayes & Carr, 2021; Rosenthal-Stott et al., 2015), implying a claim's warranting value mediates the effect of a claimant on resultant perceptions.

Few studies have empirically tested the presumed mediating role of warranting value by treating that variable as a manifest variable (Peterson & High, 2021). One notable exception to this paucity is the recent work by Lane et al. (2023), which did find that a target's ability to respond to others' claims increased the claim's warranting value (see also Hayes & Carr, 2015). Thus, the claimant—rather than the claim—affected the message's perceived warranting value and subsequently perceptions. However, in Lane et al.'s study, the attribute of the claimant being explored was the ability to reply to a claim, rather than closeness of the claimant to the target. The more a third party seems to personally benefit from portraying a target favorably, the less influential receivers find their claims (Boerman et al., 2012; Eisend et al., 2020). It should also follow that the more a third party seems

to benefit from portraying a target favorably, the less warranting value the claim possesses, and thus the less that claim subsequently influences perceptions of the offline target.

This process suggests an indirect effect of a claimant on subsequent perceptions, mediated by the claim's warranting value (cf. DeAndrea, 2014). Specifically, as a claimant is more distanced from the target, their claims are considered more immune to manipulation by the target and as should have a higher warranting value. That higher warranting value should, in turn, result in greater impression formation value. Therefore, we proffer:

*H4: A claim's warranting value mediates the effect of a claim's source on the perceptions formed of the target.*

## Method

### Participants

Participants were recruited from communication courses at a mid-sized university in the Midwestern United States to participate in an online experiment, in return for course [extra] credit. Participants' ( $N = 91$ ) average age was 20.89 ( $SD = 3.68$ ); and self-reported their gender ( $n_{\text{female}} = 66$ ,  $n_{\text{male}} = 22$ ,  $n_{\text{nonbinary}} = 2$ ,  $n_{\text{prefer not to answer}} = 1$ ). These demographics are broadly representative of the sampling frame.

### Procedure

Hypotheses predict the relationship between a claimant, the warranting value of that claim, and the resultant perceptions of a target. Extant warranting research has considered many contexts and subsequent perceptions, including perceptions of an individual's extraversion (Walther et al., 2009), a job applicant's job skills (Carr et al., 2017), and product evaluations (Shin & Dai, 2022). The present study tested hypotheses within the context of online reviews of an offline restaurant. Individuals often use online reviews, claims, and statements about restaurants to form perceptions and decide to patronize the offline, corporeal restaurant (Lim & Van Der Heide, 2014). Restaurants are increasingly engaging in ventriloquism via paying influencers to produce ads or favorable reviews on social media to influence perceptions of the restaurant (Lee et al., 2021). Consequently, the context of using online information to form impressions of an offline restaurant is an appropriate and effective one in which to conceptualize study variables. Specifically, a similar online claim made by various claimants (i.e., restaurants as first-person claimants, paid others as external dummies, and other users as third-person claimants) is expected to affect the claim's perceived warranting value and subsequent perceptions of the restaurant.

Participants were exposed to one of three online claims about a fictitious restaurant: the Earl of Sandwich, a purported fast-casual sandwich restaurant based in Massachusetts.<sup>1</sup> After consenting to participate, participants were instructed they would view a Twitter post about a restaurant outside of their area and asked to spend at least thirty seconds carefully reading and reviewing the entirety of the tweet, as they would then answer questions about the restaurant while imagining themselves patronizing it while visiting Cape Cod, MA (USA). After spending at least 30 seconds reviewing the stimulus, participants in all conditions answered a standardized set of items.

## Stimuli

All participants saw one of three Twitter posts regarding the fictitious “Earl of Sandwich” restaurant (see Figure 1). The contents of all three stimuli were held constant, save for small changes in pronouns for grammatical consistency, and presented a positive claim about the organization:

Try @EarlofSandwich! Fresh & healthy items bring [you/me] & [your/my] friends back every monday for [our/their] #BOGO combo, which is gentle on [your/my] wallet. Delivery is only \$2 & your 🥪 will arrive within 15 min of your order. That’s why [we/they]’re consistently rated best sandwich shop on #CapeCod

To ensure participants remained on the stimuli and minimize the possibility of being exposed to spurious content as would occur in hyperlinked posts, all stimuli were displayed as static images embedded within the survey engine. Utilizing a fabricated (rather than existing) company allowed the research to control for pre-existing knowledge and attitudes about the company. Because the target does not exist outside of the study, any perceptions and intentions can be attributed to the study’s stimuli rather than prior knowledge or experiences.

## Figure 1

Example Stimulus, Ventriloquism Condition



## Source of Claim

The independent variable of interest in this study was the entity making an online claim. As hypotheses specify three sources of an online claim, stimuli were altered to reflect those different claimants. In the *first-person* condition, the organization’s own account, @EarlofSandwich, posted the claim. In the *third-person* condition, an unaffiliated individual,<sup>2</sup> @ChrisMayburn, posted the claim from her personal account. @ChrisMayburn also posted the claim in the *external dummy*



condition, but additionally concluded the post with “#ad” to denote the post was likely paid content posted on behalf of the Earl of Sandwich restaurant.

## Measures

Several established measures were used to operationalize study variables. All ordinal scales were assessed on 7-point scales. Because the target of this study was a restaurant, the dependent construct—perceptions of an offline target—was more specifically conceptualized as *perceptions of the offline restaurant/food*. Perceptions of the offline restaurant were operationalized using the 6-item modified DINESERV scale (Marković et al., 2010), which asked participants to rate several dimensions of restaurant quality, including, “expensive food items,” and “excellent quality service.” The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability,  $\alpha = .72$ .

The *warranting value* of the online claim was operationalized using Lane et al.’s (2023) 7-item warranting scale. A more recent measure, Lane et al.’s scale offers a generalized operationalization of whether a warrant faithfully reflects a target’s offline characteristics. Sample items include, “The online post I read is an honest description of the actual Earl of Sandwich restaurant,” and, “The tweet I read is a representative description of the Earl of Sandwich.” The scale demonstrated good reliability,  $\alpha = .89$ .

To ensure participants sufficiently perceived the ventriloquism condition as modifiable by the target, the Earl of Sandwich, DeAndrea and Carpenter’s (2018) 4-item modification control subscale of their warranting measure was used as an induction check. Sample items include, “The Earl of Sandwich restaurant wrote some of the information about itself in the tweet I saw,” and, “The Earl of Sandwich restaurant controlled what information appeared in the tweet I saw.” The scale demonstrated good reliability,  $\alpha = .80$ .

Finally, basic demographic information was collected, including participants’ ages and self-identified genders.

## Results

### Induction Checks

Of initial interest was whether participants perceived the claims in both the first party and the external dummy condition as influenceable by the target organization, Earl of Sandwich. Contrast analysis (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985) was employed to determine whether participants in the first party and ventriloquism claim conditions viewed the tweet as more able to be modified by the claim’s target than tweet in the third party condition. Contrast coefficients are presented in Table 1 reflective of these expected differences; and analysis revealed significant differences in the expected pattern, so that participants perceived the content of the tweet was most able to be affected (i.e., modified) by the target (i.e., Earl of Sandwich) in the first-party condition ( $m = 4.23$ ,  $sd = .96$ ), less likely in the external dummy condition ( $m = 4.08$ ,  $sd = 1.22$ ), and least-likely in the third party condition ( $m = 3.53$ ,  $sd = 1.31$ ),  $t(88) = -2.44$ ,  $p = .01$  (one-tailed),  $r_{contrast} = .25$ . In other words, participants perceived the organization (i.e., Earl of Sandwich) was most-able to affect the claims made in their own posts, significantly less able to influence the claims made in the sponsored post, and significantly less able to manipulate the claims made in the third party post. Thus, the manipulation appeared successful, as contrast analysis supporting the expected pattern of differences among the three

levels of distanciation conceptualized for this study, enabling hypothesis testing.

Additionally, participants were asked whether the post to which they had been exposed was paid or sponsored content as an attention check. Only half ( $n = 15$ ) of the participants in the external ventriloquism condition correctly identified that the post had included the “#ad” acknowledgement. Such a low accuracy rate is reflective of the online audiences’ typical struggle to differentiate between paid and unpaid content (Boerman et al., 2012; Wellman et al., 2020), correctly identifying only 20% of sponsorship/ad disclosures (Krouwer et al., 2017). Reanalysis of the data excluding the individuals in the ventriloquism condition who did not accurately answer the attention check did not change the results.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, all participants were retained for hypothesis testing to reflect the typical user’s frequent inattention to such disclaimers.

### Hypothesis Testing

The first three hypotheses predict specific differences in perceptions of a target based on various pairs of a claim’s source. Hypotheses were therefore initially tested using independent samples *t*-test. These initial *t*-tests assessed differences between specific pairs of conditions. H1 predicted third-party claims result in stronger perceptions of a target’s offline characteristics than first-party claims. Consistent with this prediction, participant’s perceptions of the restaurant’s quality was greater in the third-party claim condition ( $n = 30$ ,  $m = 5.45$ ,  $sd = .82$ ) than in the first-party claim condition ( $n = 31$ ,  $m = 5.02$ ,  $sd = .74$ ),  $t(59) = -2.17$ ,  $p = .034$  (2-tailed), Cohen’s  $d = .57$ . H2 predicted third-party claims result in stronger perceptions of a target’s offline characteristics than external dummy claims. Participant’s perceptions of the restaurant’s quality was not different in the third-party claim condition than in the external dummy condition ( $n = 30$ ,  $m = 5.38$ ,  $sd = .84$ ),  $t(58) = .34$ ,  $p = .74$  (2-tailed), Cohen’s  $d = .09$ . H3 predicted ventriloquism claims result in stronger perceptions of a target’s offline characteristics than first-party claims. Again, participant’s perceptions of the restaurant’s quality did not statistically differ between the external dummy and first-party claim conditions,  $t(59) = 1.79$ ,  $p = .08$  (2-tailed), Cohen’s  $d = .23$ . Thus, pairwise *t*-tests supported H1; but suggested rejecting H2 and H3.

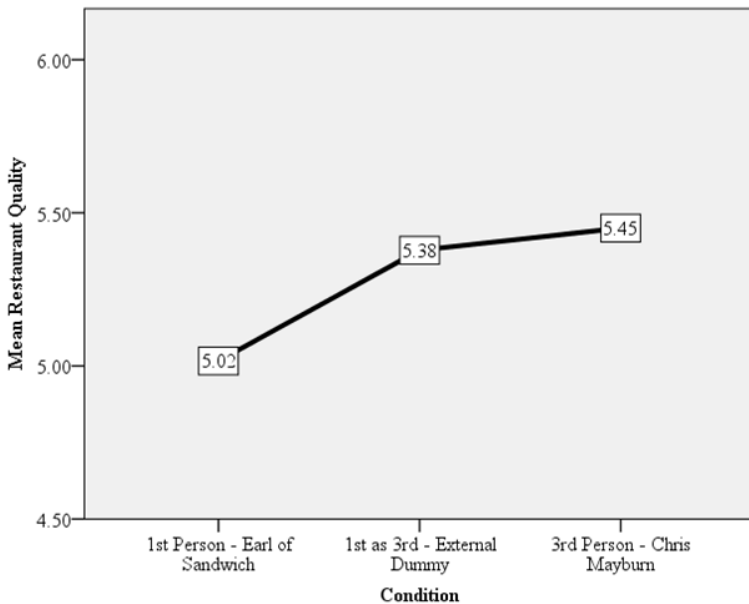
Although H1-H3 predict specific pairwise differences, taken together these hypotheses predict a specific pattern of effects, whereby the same claim made by different sources should result in different perceptual effects on the claim’s target. Specifically, it was predicted perceptions of the restaurant would be least-positive in the first-party condition (-2), moderate in the external dummy condition (-1), and most-positive in the third-party claim condition (+3). A contrast analysis was therefore appropriate to test for the hypothesized pattern of effects among the three conditions (using the noted contrast weights) on perceptions of the restaurant. The contrast analysis supported the hypothesized pattern of differences in restaurant perceptions,  $t(88) = 1.73$ ,  $p = .04$  (one-tailed),  $r_{contrast} = .18$ . Specifically, Earl of Sandwich was perceived least-favorably by participants exposed to a tweet by @EarlOfSandwich, moderately by participants exposed to a sponsored third-party tweet (i.e., external dummy), and most-favorably by participants exposed to a third-party tweet. Though the independent *t*-tests indicate much of this difference seems driven by the first-party condition (see Figure 1), the pattern of results is overall consistent with the pattern of effects hypothesized in H1-H3. Ultimately,

**Table 1**  
*Means (Standard Deviations) of Study Variables and Contrast Weights and Analyses Among Conditions*

Variable	Condition			Contrast Test	
	1st Person	Ventriloquism	3rd Person	<i>t</i> (88)	<i>r</i> <sub>contrast</sub>
Contrast Weights	-2	-1	3		
Warranting - Modifiability	4.23 (.96)	4.08 (1.22)	3.53 (1.31)	-2.44†	.25
Warranting Value (Lane et al., 2023)	4.55 (1.04)	4.14 (1.12)	4.36 (1.04)	-.65	.13
Restaurant Quality	5.02 (.74)	5.38 (.84)	5.45 (.82)	1.73*	.18
<i>n</i>	31	30	30		

Notes: \*  $p < .05$  (one-tailed); †  $p < .01$  (one-tailed)

**Figure 2**  
*Restaurant Perceptions Based on Claim's Source*



results of the contrast test confirm the expected pattern of differences between the three message sources; and further empirically support the ventriloquism condition as a midpoint (based on different resultant perceptions of the target offline) between the first and third party claimant conditions.

The fourth hypothesis predicts a mediation effect of warranting value. Given the differences in the modifiability of claims identified via contrast analysis in the induction check, we initially examine whether the proposed mediator—a claim's warranting value—varied in a similar pattern. Contrast analysis was again employed with the same contrast weights (see Table 1 for weights and condition means) to explore differences in warranting value among conditions. The contrast analysis did not support the hypothesized pattern of differences,  $t(88) = -.65$ ,  $p = .26$  (one-tailed),  $r_{contrast} = .07$ . This finding helps provide discriminant validity between our message sender and warranting value constructs, and thus reducing the concern of multicollinearity between the mediator, warranting value (Lane et al., 2023), and the antecedent factor, message sender.

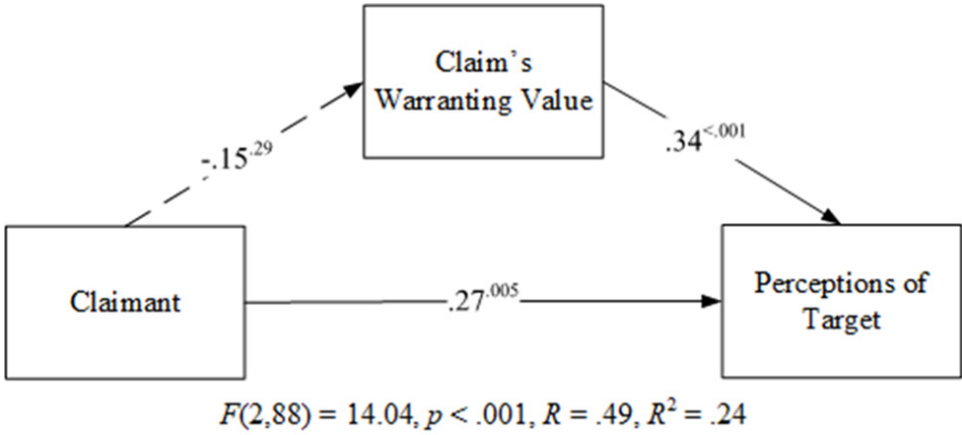
The mediation hypothesized by H4 was then tested using Hayes' (2020) PROCESS macro (v. 3.3; model 4, using 5,000 bootstrapped samples).<sup>4</sup> *Message sender* (dummy-coded as an ordinal-level variable based on expected data patterns, as supported by the contrast analysis of H1-H3) was entered as the independent variable, the claim's perceived *warranting value* (via Lane et al.'s, [2023] measure) as a mediator, and participants' *restaurant perceptions* as the dependent variable in the model (see Figure 3). The total effect of the message sender on restaurant perceptions was significant,  $b = .22$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p = .036$ ,  $CI [.02, .42]$ . However, though the direct effect of message sender ( $c'$ ;  $b = .27$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $CI [.08, .45]$ ) and the claim's *warranting value* ( $b$ ;  $b = .34$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI [.08, .45]$ ) on restaurant perceptions were significant, the claim's warranting value did not have a significant indirect effect on the effect of sender on restaurant perceptions ( $a$ ;  $b = -.15$ ,  $SE = .14$ ,  $p = .29$ ,  $CI [-.42, .13]$ ). Taken together, results of the contrast analysis and mediation analysis suggest rejection of H4. Though both message sender and a claim's warranting value had main effects on offline perceptions of the target, the claim's warranting value did not mediate the relationship between message sender and subsequent perceptions of the target.

## Discussion

The present study found support that the source of an online claim about a target impacts perceptions of that target's offline characteristics. Specifically, first-party, first-as-third party (i.e., external dummy), and third-party claims—in that order—were found to predict increasingly favorable perceptions of the claim's target: the Earl of Sandwich restaurant. This study extends warranting theory by considering an additional source of claim, incorporating the construct of organizational ventriloquism.

## Implications for Warranting Theory and Research

Previous warranting literature has tended to focus on first- versus third-party claims (e.g., DeAndrea & Vendemia, 2019; Walther et al., 2009). However, particularly online, the typology of claimants is not binary—that is, for example, an online user may not merely be a first or a third party. Instead, we increasingly see ventriloquist claims by way of influencers or paid sponsorship (Krouwer et al., 2018). The present study found perceptions of a target's offline characteristics became stronger as the claimant was more distanced from the organization. Con-

**Figure 3***Mediation Model Results*

Note: Path coefficients are standardized effects. Superscript numbers indicate  $p$ -values. "Claimant" coded as ordinal-level variable based on expected pattern of effects (see H3 and corresponding test), so that lower-values are expected to have lesser (a) impact on perceptions and (b) warranting value. 1 = first person; 2 = external dummy; 3 = third person

trast analysis supported the expected differences in manipulation control based on the claimant, and specifically the level of distanciation between the target organization and claimant. The present study thus suggests expanding our consideration of a message's source ought to be included moving forward, given the variance in perceptions of the target identified herein. Particularly within organizations' communication, which can vary widely in its level of distanciation, future warranting scholarship may find utility in applying distanciation rather than modifiability to conceptualize and operationalize factors that can influence perceptions of the target offline, particularly as warranting research continues to expand beyond the interpersonal context.

More focally, a claim's warranting value directly affected perceptions of the target's offline characteristics. As claims about Earl of Sandwich were held constant across conditions, a critical finding for warranting research is that within-participant differences in the perception the online claim reflected the offline self accounted for differences in resultant perceptions of Earl of Sandwich's offline attributes. Online, where identity claims can be made of varying fidelity to actual corporeal selves, these data further evidence that understanding the degree to which perceivers view online claims as tethered to an offline target impact impression formation.

At the same time, our findings reveal a gap in our understanding of warranting value and its connection with the source of the claim and perception of the message. Though DeAndrea (2014) described warranting value as the extent to which information can be manipulated (implying a claimant influences the warranting value their claim), a claim's warranting value did not differ among various senders. Analyses revealed the claimant did not indirectly affect perceptions of the offline restaurant via the claim's warranting value: Warranting value was independent of claimant. Deviating from prior theorizing, these results evidence that

a claim's warranting value, while having its own effect on how individuals form impressions of the target offline, may not have the expected indirect relationship (cf. DeAndrea, 2014; Lane et al., 2023). An online claim's warranting value appears to be derived from more than the target's ability to influence that claim, and future work should continue to determine and validate antecedents to warranting value.

Finally, data further advance issues of the measurement of the warranting construct, measuring warranting value as a latent variable rather than presuming warranting value as an artifact of experimental design (see Peterson & High, 2021). Two scales measured disparate understandings of warranting value: DeAndrea and Carpenter's (2018) measure operationalizes the ability of a source to manipulate or influence a claim or its dissemination online (see also DeAndrea, 2014), whereas Lane et al.'s (2023) measure operationalizes the degree to which a perceiver believes an online claim faithfully connects to a target's offline self (see Walther & Parks, 2002). Importantly, findings demonstrate divergent effects between the two measures: The belief a target could affect the source's claim more strongly differed between claimant conditions than the belief the online claim faithfully represented the offline restaurant (see Table 1). Though Lane et al.'s (2023) scale requires continued use and validation, the varied effects demonstrated indicate scholars may have choices when measuring the warranting construct, and would be well-advised to consider the deeper construct intended to operationalize appropriately.

### **Practical Implications**

Given the increasing use of influencers and paid sponsors by organizations to promote their messages, this study also presents practical implications regarding spokespersons. Namely, while organic, third-party claims about an organization result in the most favorable perceptions of that organization because organizations cannot control these types of claim. To control a claim, organizations must either speak as themselves (i.e., first party) or induce others to speak on their behalf (i.e., first-as-third-party, ventriloquism). Importantly, the present study finds ventriloquism claims result in more favorable perceptions of the claim's target than first-party claims. That is, sponsored content (e.g., influencers, paid accounts, promotions) matters and should be a consideration of organizations as an influential means of communicating with their audiences. Parallel to Johnson et al.'s (2019) findings, an influencer—even a micro-influencer without a large following—may be a more effective spokesperson than the organization itself. In addition, our findings contribute to brand identity management and explain the popularity and effectiveness of characters or external agents. Similar to influencers, tacitly-associated agents (e.g., Flo from Progressive; Lucky of Lucky Charms cereal) can speak on behalf of the brand using a distinct voice and credibility (Karpinska-Krakowiak & Eisend, 2021), creating an independent claimant whose messages are perceived to correspond with offline attributes.

### **Limitations**

Offering several novel contributions, this work also has limitations that provide opportunities for future research. Regarding the third party's social media account profile photo, we used a profile photo that had been predetermined to be

neutral on perceived physical attractiveness and trustworthiness (Ma et al., 2015); but certainly source effects—including both the characteristics and familiarity with a poster—likely further influence the processes identified here. An additional note of potential concern is the low accuracy reported in attention check items, specifically in the ventriloquism condition. Though explicable (Boermann et al., 2012; Krouwer et al., 2017), such inaccuracy remains concerning and may draw suspicions of results. Future work may seek to directly consider how ventriloquism is disclosed, expanding on the present operationalization (i.e., a simple “#ad” disclosure) to consider other means of indicating an organization has influenced a third party’s claims (e.g., banners, graphics, more invasive disclosure techniques). The statements, imagery, and even voice used by third parties all may facilitate varying degrees of awareness—and thus effects—of organizational influence.

## Conclusion

The dominant line of research into and applying warranting theory has considered a claim’s warranting value a function of the claimant—the entity making the claim—typically bifurcating the sender into either first or third party. Counter to this line, the present research finds a claim’s warranting value can vary independent of the claimant, as the same message source can have varying degrees of connection to the target and the target’s distance from the organization about which it makes a claim *does* influence resultant perceptions. Even a manipulation as simple as an oft-overlooked “#ad” in a message can significantly affect the resultant perceptions of the target offline. As more types of entities are able to make more diverse claims online, this research shows the nature of the online claim may be just as important as who made a claim. And although the source and the message may both directly influence impression formation, message and source appear to be disparate, surprisingly-unrelated warrants relative to resultant offline perceptions.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There is an actual “Earl of Sandwich” franchise based out of Orlando, Florida, USA. However, no franchisees are located in the region in which this study was conducted. Additionally, a single item at the end of the study questionnaire asked participants if they had heard of the actual “Earl of Sandwich,” and included the chain’s logo to clarify. Four participants had heard of that chain before, and only one of those indicated they had thought of the FL-based chain when responding (rather than the MA-based chain fabricated in the stimuli material). Between the low brand awareness of the extant chain, and the differentiating logo and store information provided in the study stimuli, we are not overly concerned with the potential conflation of this study’s stimuli with the extant restaurant.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Mayburn’s profile photo was drawn from the Chicago Face Database (<https://www.chicagofaces.org/>), a standardized database of human faces pretested for both physical attributes and subjective ratings. To minimize potential spurious effects due to the claimant’s profile photo, we deliberately selected a facial photo whose physical attractiveness and trustworthiness were near the normed mean of the database.

<sup>3</sup> Following the editor’s suggestion, data were reanalyzed after reassigning the half of participants in the external dummy condition into the third party condition, given their lack of explicit note of @ChrisMayburn’s “#ad” disclaimer. Results did not meaningfully differ

from when participants were attributed to their assigned condition. Still consistent with H1, participant's perceptions of the restaurant's quality was greater in the third-party claim condition ( $n = 45$ ,  $m = 5.43$ ,  $sd = .86$ ) than in the first-party claim condition ( $n = 31$ ,  $m = 5.02$ ,  $sd = .74$ ),  $t(74) = -2.17$ ,  $p = .033$  (2-tailed), Cohen's  $d = .50$ . With respect to H2, participant's perceptions of the restaurant's quality were still not different in the third-party claim condition than in the external dummy condition ( $n = 15$ ,  $m = 5.37$ ,  $sd = .71$ ),  $t(58) = .25$ ,  $p = .80$  (2-tailed), Cohen's  $d = .07$ . With respect to H3, participant's perceptions of the restaurant's quality still did not statistically differ between the external dummy and first-party claim conditions,  $t(44) = 1.53$ ,  $p = .13$  (2-tailed), Cohen's  $d = .46$ . Finally, the contrast analysis supported the hypothesized pattern of differences,  $t(88) = 1.77$ ,  $p = .04$  (one-tailed),  $r_{contrast} = .18$ .

<sup>4</sup> For readers concerned about a mediation analysis using an ordinal-level independent variable, supplemental analyses are available via OSF (<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/RWQ98>) to account for this concern, including omission of the ventriloquism condition and using all three experimental conditions as referents to the other two. None of these alternate analyses resulted in substantively different results.

### Open Science Statement

Anonymized stimuli and data associated with this study can be found at: [https://osf.io/rwq98/?view\\_only=3b8acb57de1c48ad842e8a7593252908](https://osf.io/rwq98/?view_only=3b8acb57de1c48ad842e8a7593252908)

### Author Note

This research was conducted as part of COM418 (Seminar in Mediated Communication: Warranting) during Fall, 2022, under instruction and advisement of the last author. All enrolled scholars contributed to this work equitably, and consequently are listed alphabetically—ordering of first six authors should not be considered to denote relative contributions.

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