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An exploratory study to conceptualize press engagement behavior with public relations practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses how journalists respond to public relations (PR) practitioners in co-creating value for their audiences. The co-creation perspective is conceptualized by synthesizing extant literature from public relations and relationship marketing, including cultivation strategies in organization-public relationships studies, two-way symmetrical model in excellence theory, intereffication model, service-dominant (S-D) logic of co-creation in marketing, and customer engagement theories. Using long-interview technique with 18 journalists, the study investigates how journalists perceive media relations activities of PR practitioners from a value co-creation dimension. A new theoretical model titled *press engagement behavior (PEB)* with sub-dimensions in *press participation behavior (PPB)* and *press citizenship behavior (PCB)* is proposed. A thirty-item scale is proposed to guide future study on scale development and validation. The proposed new model can explain the context of journalist engagement, enriching the operational value of cultivation strategies in dyadic relationship settings.

1. Introduction

Recent trends show that the source-reporter relationship has become closer than ever. Research shows that journalists now actively request information from public relations (PR) practitioners for specific content for news generation, a phenomenon called “media catching” (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). PR practitioners are developing vast amounts of rich-content information through their controlled media platforms to share and collaborate with reporters. The popularity of online e-news channels of communication and a 24-hour news cycle is putting further pressure on journalists to meet tight publishing deadlines by collaborating with PR practitioners through press materials provided by PR firms (Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008). McManus suggested that the profit pressure on news rooms requires more reliance on public relations materials and a more collaborative approach towards the source-reporter relationship (McManus, 1994).

Botan and Taylor (2004, p.651–652) showed how public relations practitioners have moved from a functional role to playing a co-creation role with reporters, describing it as the “most striking trend in public relations” over the past 20 years. The co-creation view considers the key publics as “co-creators of meaning and communication as what makes it possible to agree to shared meanings, interpretations and goals”. This view is an extension of the organization-public relationships (OPR) perspective which considers relationships to be the center of public relations research (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 1997; Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Bruning, 2002;

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Ferguson, 1984; Bruning and Ledingham, 1999). Through in depth interviews with 18 journalists, this study adopts a relationship marketing co-creation perspective (Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric, & Ilic, 2011; Vargo, 2008; Vargo & Lusch, 2008) to investigate how journalists perceive the media relations activities of PR practitioners. This study extends further Grunig's call (2006) to develop symmetrical cultivation strategies in media relations.

We first examine the existing literature to provide the theoretical development process, next we describe the methodology, and then we report the results of the qualitative study, followed by discussion of the results. We conclude by discussing both the theoretical and managerial implications, limitations of the study, and an outline of the next phase of quantitative procedures for scale development.

2. Literature review

2.1. Cultivation strategies in organization-public relationships studies

Extensive research has been conducted by scholars in exploring the trio-staged process in organization-public relationships (OPR) studies (Ki & Hon, 2008). First, the *antecedents* of OPR (Bowen, Hung-Baesecke, & Chen, 2016; Broom et al., 1997; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001b), addressing the question of *why* there is a need and *preconditions* required to establish relationships. Second, *maintenance* (Hon & Grunig, 1999) or *cultivation* strategies (Grunig, 2006) which address the question *how* to continue quality relationships. Finally, the *outcome* of OPR relationship quality (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Bruning, Castle & Schrepfer, 2004).

Scholars had developed several cultivation strategies, including access, positivity, openness, sharing of tasks, networking and assurances (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Cultivation strategies lead to higher relational outcomes such as control mutuality, satisfaction, trust and commitment (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001a), and behavioral intentions and evaluations (Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Bruning & Ralston, 2000, 2001).

The focus of our study is to develop a suitable measure to evaluate the success of the cultivation strategies by examining the level of journalist *engagement* with PR practitioners in the OPR framework.

2.2. Application of excellence theory in customer engagement/co-creation studies

In his seminal work on excellence study, Grunig postulates the value of public relations in an organization resides in the principle that PR should:

...behave in ways that solves the problems and satisfies the goals of stakeholders as well as of management... Then, organizations must communicate symmetrically with the different kinds of publics found within these stakeholder categories to develop high-quality, long-term relationships with them (Grunig, 2006, p.159).

In the key thesis of excellence theory, the two-way symmetrical model of communication suggests:

...individuals, organizations, and publics should use communication to adjust their ideas and behavior to those of others rather than to try to control how others think and behave (Grunig, 2006, p.156).

..the most productive relationships in the long run are those that benefit both parties in the relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p.11).

The co-creation perspective viewed publics as long-term partners to establish relationships to fulfill and exceed organizational goals (Botan & Taylor, 2004). In relationship marketing literature, parallels can be drawn to customer relationship management by engaging them as partners in meaningful exchanges to create mutually beneficial relationships. The term *customer engagement* can be broadly defined as a multidimensional concept where it captures a psychological state in customers' interactive, co-creative experiences with other stakeholders in networked service relationships (Brodie et al., 2011, p.260).

Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008) synthesized marketing thoughts stretching back over a century to arrive at the service-centered dominant logic (S-D logic) view of marketing, which considers that all economic exchanges are "service" by nature, a combination of human knowledge, skills, and creative design embedded in goods and services. Therefore, value is co-created jointly between and among organizations and their partners or customers through "service" provision and use. The co-creation perspective considers stakeholders as partners and valuable resources which need to be engaged carefully for long-term beneficial results.

The significance of development of customer engagement was flagged by the Marketing Science Institute as a top research priority in 2014–2016 (Marketing Science Institute, 2014). One strand of PR research that is most relevant in this context of public relations-journalist engagement is business-to-business partner engagement (B2B-PE) (Vivek, Dalela, & Beatty, 2015). The B2B-PE concept acknowledges that apart from the end-customer, other key stakeholders are critical to an organization's success. B2B-PE is defined as "episodes of intense inter-organizational resource and social exchanges between two independent or interdependent entities, directed towards common outcomes" (Vivek et al., 2015, p.56).

Owing to the fact that the current 24-hour news cycle and the unrelenting presence of social media demand shortened response time, B2B-PE attempts to capture short-term "episodes", referred as B2B partner engagement, during relationship encounters (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Examples include engaging journalists to report the latest company results through results announcements or responding to journalists during a crisis situation. It is hypothesized that in the long run, these series of episodic encounters could have positive or negative valences that will determine the relationship quality over time (Vivek et al., 2015).

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