Toward an effective government–public relationship: Organization–public relationship based on a synthetic approach to public segmentation

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The goal of this study is to identify and understand an effective government–public relationship building based on a synthetic approach to public segmentation. Using a national survey dataset, this study examines how different types of publics have trust differently in federal, state, and local government. By exploring how situational and cross-situational variables predict trust in government, the study finds that there are different predictors for trust in each level of government. Further, the results provide important insight into how public relations practitioners and researchers can build and maintain an effective government–public relationship with the key publics. Thus, the current study aims to fundamentally make contribution to theoretical and practical development in relationship-building research.

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1. Introduction

This study explores an effective government–public relationship building through public segmentation, a critical concern for government public relations (Hong, Park, Lee, & Park, 2012). For the effective government–public relationships, understanding the diverse publics by segmenting publics is required as an integral step; however, many public relations researchers have rarely applied public segmentation to their research (Hong et al., 2012). Moreover, many academic scholars have not illuminated how segmented publics have different levels of trust in federal, state, and local government (Schario & Konisky, 2008; Hong, 2013). The research gap of government–public relationship is the primary rationale to conduct this study. The current study examines public trust in federal, state, and local government in the United States, based on synthetic approach to public segmentation considering situational and cross-situational variables.

2. Literature review

2.1. Organization–public relationship (OPR) and public trust in government

For decades, organization–public relationship (OPR) has been increasingly highlighted as an essential part of public relations research and practice (Lee & Park, 2013). Researchers have investigated important factors for the quality of OPR and put

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Table 1
Characteristics of public segments.

Factors	The underserved inactive majority (largest: Cluster I)	The cluster in-between (Cluster II)	The satisfied active public (smallest: Cluster III)
Media use	High TV watching High political news watching Low internet use	⟺	Low TV watching Low political news watching High internet use
Social behavior	Low participation in voluntary organizations		High participation in voluntary organizations
Social cog-ni-tion	Low interest in politics Low satisfaction with democracy work Low trust in others Low standards in citizenship		High interest in politics High satisfaction with democracy work High trust in others High standards in citizenship
Demographics	Low education Low income		High education High income

Note: Adapted from "Characteristics of public segments" by Hong et al. (2012).

more effort to find a key indicator; that is, trust (Hong et al., 2012; Ki & Hon, 2007). As the cornerstone of OPR, trust has been closely intertwined with research of government–public relationship because it results in attitudinal and behavioral conse-quences in a relationship between public and government (Hong, 2013; Waymer, 2013). Trust leads publics to make greater commitment, cooperation, and compliance for government (Kim, 2005). Meanwhile, overall public trust in government has been deteriorating for the past several decades, and it has become the most challenge for the government–public relation-ship (Hong, 2013; Wang & Wart, 2007). In order to effectively build and strategically enhance trust in the government, the importance of tailored communication to different types of publics (segmented publics) has been suggested; however, the existing studies have overlooked it (Hong et al., 2012).

2.2. Public segmentation and government–public relationship

Public segmentation research has suggested that understanding the diverse spectrum of publics is a primary step for effective organization–public relationship (Kim & Ni, 2013; Kim et al., 2008; Ni & Kim, 2009). Public segmentation becomes considerably prominent as a vital process in government public relations (Hong et al., 2012). In government public relations, government should be operated to enhance public good in contrast to other private organizations' role and function making profit (Horsley, Liu, & Levenshus, 2010). Public segmentation has been researched in terms of two different approaches which have run parallel to each other; cross-situational (static: demographics and psychographics) and situational (dynamic: ephemeral notions such as problems or issues) approaches (Kim et al., 2008). Since it has potential to maximize the power of situational and cross-situational approach, synthesizing situational and cross-situational approaches has been increasingly suggested for the successful organization–public relationship (Hong et al., 2012; Kim & Ni, 2013).

As the first attempt, Hong et al. (2012) applied synthetic approach to public segmentation for effective government–public relationship building. They proposed a new model consisting of *the underserved inactive majority, the cluster in between,* and *the satisfied active public* by integrating situational (social behavior and cognition), cross-situational variables (demograph-ics), and other objective variables (media use) (Hong et al., 2012). Their model demonstrated that inactive publics, as the majority group, are likely to have low trust in federal government (Hong et al., 2012) (See Table 1). Despite theoretically and practically worthwhile finding, Hong et al. (2012) failed to illuminate how well their situational and cross-situational variables can predict trust differently in federal, state, and local government as the essential effort to find the key publics. Therefore, this study aims to fill the gaps, leading to the following hypotheses:

H1. The satisfied active public will be more likely to have high trust across different levels of governments than the underserved inactive majority public.

H2. Characteristics of public segmentation, particularly situational (social cognition) and cross- situational (demographic factors) variables will significantly predict well high public trust across different levels of government, controlling for other variables.

3. Methods

3.1. Dataset description and measurements

This study used a dataset of a national survey, the 2012 Value Survey, which Pew Research Center conducted with 3008 adults over 18 years old living in 50 states in April, 2012. The survey was based on telephone interview survey, 1800 landlines and 1200 cell phones (Pew Research Center, 2012). The questions asking the favorable level in government (local, state, and federal level) were used to measure trust in federal, state, and local government as dependent variables on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very unfavorable) to 5 (very favorable) (Price, 2012). As independent variables, six survey items were