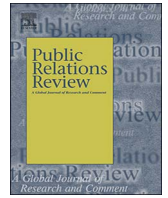


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Looking back, moving forward: A review and reflection of the organization-public relationship (OPR) research

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ABSTRACT

Organization-Public Relationship (OPR), as a key concept addressed in the field of public relations has attracted wide attention in the past three decades. This study presents a comprehensive review of 156 relevant studies from 1998 to 2016 and categorizes them into five main clusters, which include the outcomes, antecedents, mediation, process, and structure of OPR. Findings also identify five gaps in current OPR research such as idealized propositions based on mutual benefits, a lack of research on multi-party relationships, problematic “trust” as the measurement, unilateral self-reported research data, and dominated cross-sectional methods. By drawing contingency theory of accommodation and the relationship management theory, this study proposes the concept of contingent organization-public relationship (COPR) for future studies that seek to explore variations of OPR longitudinally.

1. Introduction

Since Dr. Ferguson (Ferguson, 1984) called for a shift of focus on the concept of relationship between the organization and its publics in 1984, organization-public relationship (OPR) has become a heated topic among academics (Bortree, 2010; Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Dougall, 2006; Huang, 2001a, 2001b, 2008, 2012; Huang & Zhang, 2013; Hung, 2005; Kang & Yang, 2010; Ki & Shin, 2006; Kim, 2001; Yang & Taylor, 2014). Scholars reinforced that the relationship should be the focus of public relations and emphasized its contribution to the organizational effectiveness (Dozier, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1995; Huang, 2001a, 2001b). Kent and Taylor (2002) even argued that a “theoretical shift” should occur— “from public relations reflecting an emphasis on managing communication to an emphasis on communication as a tool for negotiating relationships” (p. 21).

Since 1998, scholars such as Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 1999), Ledingham (2003), and Ki, Kim, and Ledingham (2014) built a theoretical statement of relationship management in public relations and stated that the goal of building and maintaining relationship was for mutual benefits among organizations and their publics. The developed multi-dimensional scale for measuring OPRs resulted in quantities of citations and numerous following studies that applied and extended the concept of OPR. For example, Grunig and Huang (2000) proposed six important dimensions of relationships (i.e., control, mutuality, trust, relational satisfaction, relational commitment, and goal attainment) to examine what the good relationships were. Coombs (2000) proposed the concept of relationship history and extended the OPR research to crisis communication. Huang (2001a) extended the measurement of OPR to the Eastern context and added “face” and “guanxi” into the original dimensions of OPR generated by Western scholars. Dougall (2006) tested OPR in a conflict continuum and traced the bank-activists relationship over 20 years. Yang and Taylor (2014) applied an ecological approach to analyze the organizational-centric social network relationships. With the booming of social media, scholars began to explore online OPR and found that active engagement on social media can enhance the organization-public relationship (Sweetser, English, & Fernandes, 2015).

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Considering these diversified approaches and the large amount of relevant literature on OPR in the field of public relations, some scholars such as Huang and Zhang (2013) and Ki and Shin (2006) provided systematical literature reviews of the status of the OPR research in the field of public relations. However, they conducted the studies before the year of 2012 and might not provide a solid solution for the challenges of the OPR research such as a longitudinal measurement of relationships. This study intended to expand previous research and addressed three important research questions below.

RQ1. What is the general picture of the OPR research, in terms of the theoretical and methodological approaches from 1998 to 2016?

RQ2. What is the reflection for current OPR research?

RQ3. What is the direction for future OPR research?

1.1. Purpose of this study

The study took a synthesized review of how global scholarship examined the realm of OPR in public relations from 1998 to 2016. It provided insights for the theoretical and practical implications from three dimensions: a) the extensive literature review on OPR by presenting its evolution on theoretical and methodological approaches, b) the reflection of existing OPR research by pointing out several weaknesses such as problematic “trust” as the measurement, unilateral self-reported research data, and dominated cross-sectional methods, and c) the new concept named contingent OPR (COPR) that provides conceptual and methodological clarity for future studies seeking to explore variations of OPR longitudinally.

2. Method

In order to present a comprehensive overview of the OPR research, this study searched the *Journal of Public Relations Research* (SSCI), the *Public Relations Review* (SSCI), the *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* (SSCI), the *Journal of Communication* (SSCI), the *Communication Theory* (SSCI), and the *American Behavioral Scientist* (SSCI). Other relevant journals such as the *Journal of Communication Management*, the *Journal of Promotion Management*, and the *International Journal of Strategic Communication* were also included. A total of twelve academic journals (as shown in Table 1) and mainly relevant academic disciplines (public relations or communication) were selected for full screening (the year ranges from 1998 to 2016). The method of keyword screening was applied to filter related articles in each journal. Articles with any of the following keywords, either in titles, abstracts or keywords were selected for review: “organization-public relationship(s)”; “OPR”; “relationship management”; or “relationship building”. One hundred and fifty-six original research articles in English exclusively focusing on OPR were confirmed as directly relevant to the purpose of this study and shortlisted for final qualitative content analysis. Table 1 provides an overview of the number of published articles in according journals. Among the total 156 articles drawn from 12 journals; forty-nine articles (31.41%) were in *Journal of Public Relations Research* and forty articles (25.64%) in *Public Relations Review*; serving as major outlets for the OPR research.

The following aspects of OPR study in the articles served as categories of analysis for this paper: a) the definition of OPR, b) research focus, and c) the major findings of the study. The following methodological items were coded as well: a) research method (survey, experiment, interview, case study, etc.), b) the dimensions of measuring OPR. A total of 39 articles (25%) were randomly selected for a reliability check, and the inter-coder reliability of the variables examined was between 0.91 and 1.0 by applying Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff, 2003).

Table 1
The Number of the OPR Research Article in Each Journal.

Source	No. of Result	Percentage (%)
<i>Journal of Public Relations Research</i>	49	31.41
<i>Public Relations Review</i>	40	25.64
<i>Journal of Communication Management</i>	21	13.46
<i>International Journal of Strategic Communication</i>	18	11.55
<i>Journal of Promotion Management</i>	10	6.41
<i>Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly</i>	9	5.77
<i>Journal of Communication</i>	3	1.92
<i>Communication Theory</i>	2	1.28
<i>Chinese Journal of Communication</i>	1	0.64
<i>Central European Journal of Communication</i>	1	0.64
<i>Southern Communication Journal</i>	1	0.64
<i>American Behavioral Scientist</i>	1	0.64
Total	156	100.00

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