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# Public relations and zones of engagement: Employees' lived experiences and the fundamental nature of employee engagement

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## ABSTRACT

While employee engagement has been primarily explored within the business, human resources and management disciplines, public relations research has more recently taken an interest in furthering its understanding and acknowledging how public relations can serve an organization's internal communication as a foundational component of the field. The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how public relations can serve an organization's internal communication by better understanding how employees perceive and experience engagement. Following a phenomenological methodology ( $n = 32$ ), this study utilized zones of meaning as a conceptual foundation (not a literal interpretation) to examine the process related to the complex, shifting and shared meaning of zones of engagement and how zones of meaning are products as well as drivers of engagement, which offer a new way to conceptualize employee engagement in public relations, shifting to a deeper comprehension and understanding. The findings show that employee experiences align more to Kahn's (1990) initial personal engagement model than other public relations models. The psychological conditions of meaningfulness and safety from the original employee engagement model emerged as important factors in defining the employees' shared-meaning lived experiences. In addition, this study offers a new definition of disengagement, which is similar but unique to the scholarship on negative engagement. The findings provide a framework for public relations scholars who work to further refine the understanding of employee engagement and for practitioners who develop public relations strategies for internal audiences, and advances the conceptual foundation of zones of meaning in public relations scholarship.

## 1. Introduction

While employee engagement has been primarily explored within the business, human resources and management disciplines, public relations research has more recently taken an interest in furthering its understanding and acknowledging how public relations can serve an organization's internal communication as a foundational component of the field. Thus, the purpose of this study is to better understand how employees perceive and experience engagement in relation to how public relations has an internal communication management responsibility, in addition to and in coordination with its external communication management responsibility, in the constitutive role by which organizations become communicative. Following a phenomenological methodology ( $n = 32$ ), this study utilized zones of meaning as a conceptual foundation (not a literal interpretation) to examine the process related to the complex, shifting and shared meaning of zones of engagement and how zones of meaning are products as well as drivers of

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engagement, which offer a new way to conceptualize employee engagement in public relations, shifting to a deeper comprehension and understanding. The findings show that employee experiences align more to Kahn (1990) initial personal engagement model than other public relations models. The psychological conditions of meaningfulness and safety from the original employee engagement model emerged as important factors in defining the employees' shared-meaning lived experiences. In addition, this study offers a new definition of disengagement, which is similar but unique to the scholarship on negative engagement. The findings provide a framework for public relations scholars who work to further refine the understanding of employee engagement, and for practitioners who develop public relations strategies, in coordination with organizational communication practitioners and human resource professionals, for internal audiences. It also advances the conceptual foundation of zones of meaning in public relations scholarship.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Public relations and engagement

Engagement research in public relations began over two decades ago as an embedded concept and since has been examined in relation to other concepts such as corporate social responsibility, social capital, and internal communication (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Stoker and Tusinski (2006) initially argued that engagement has the potential to be the next paradigm for the field of public relations. Johnston (2014) suggested that engagement is an important component of organizational life used to deconstruct and provide insight into the meanings and values that result from communicative interactions among diverse publics. Engagement allows organizations to become more cognizant of power dynamics and shift toward a more co-creational perspective. Botan and Taylor (2004) proposed that the co-creational approach values a setting where all organizational members contribute to the meaning-making process, while Stoker and Tusinski (2006) stated that engagement offers organizations the opportunity to honor the multivocality that comes from communicating with different audiences and provides organizations the ability to understand the differences that make diverse audiences unique.

Despite public relations scholarly calls for the potential and possibilities associated with engagement research, the concept lacks a certain robustness across the public relations literature. Taylor and Kent (2014) suggested that engagement is an ideograph or a word that is both unclear and ephemeral. Engagement seems to be easily understood, but as the term is unpackaged in research, the complexities associated with it are uncovered. One area of particular interest for engagement scholars in public relations is employee engagement.

### 2.2. Defining employee engagement

Within the public relations literature, employees have long been considered a key stakeholder group for organizations to maintain positive relationships for various functional, social economic reasons, including the potential for employees to affect how external audiences view their organization (Grunig, 1992; Kim & Rhee, 2011). For example, according to Heath (2011), stakeholder theory attends to the rights and obligations – both inside and outside of an organization – as power resources applied by competing interests. Regarding external stakeholders, many organizations develop and execute strategic internal communication initiatives to keep management and employees informed of key issues that affect their organization so they are capable of discussing these issues in an informed way with both internal and external stakeholders (Welch & Jackson, 2007) – a process whereby organizations become communicative.

Kahn (1990) initially defined employee engagement as the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). Kahn (1992) later added the concept of psychological presence to the definition. Other scholars have used similar definitions to the original proposed definition. For example, Men (2012) defined employee engagement as how psychologically present employees are when performing organizational roles. Welch (2011) extended the original definition to what she calls “organization engagement” as “a dynamic, changeable psychological state, which links employees to their organizations, manifest in organization member role performances expressed physically, cognitively and emotionally, and influenced by organization-level internal communication” (p. 337).

The preceding definitions position employee engagement, often initiated through public relations practice and tactics, as the primary facilitator of job performances and emphasize the ways in which employees can connect with both their positions, organizations and external stakeholders. Johnston (2014) suggested that engagement is the process of meaning-making between organizations and target audiences and in this case, engagement centers on the construction of meaning between an organization and its employees. Most other definitions offer an end goal for employee engagement and provide analysis of some of its different components. However, limiting employee engagement to role performance prevents a sophisticated understanding of the concept and the meaning behind employee engagement.

### 2.3. Zones of meaning

One approach to understanding the meaning-making process in public relations is using Heath (1993) zones of meaning. For the purpose of this paper, the zones of meaning are complex, shifting and shared meaning that are products as well as drivers of engagement. Zones of meaning are rooted in a rhetorical perspective to better understand and explain how meaning is created. Heath (1993) developed the zones of meaning from Burke (1966) research, which explained that meaning is both created and articulated

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