Explicating communicative organization-stakeholder relationships in the digital age: A systematic review and research agenda

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Explicating communicative organization-stakeholder relationships in the digital age: A systematic review and research agenda

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ABSTRACT

The digital age is a game-changer for the communication between organizations and stakeholders. Relationships are pivotal to public relations. However, their conceptualizations, measures, and normative assumptions have neither been analyzed systematically and across disciplines, nor have they been studied in light of the changing digital communication landscape. This article re-examines the relationship paradigm in public relations and marketing in an online environment. By means of a systematic review, it seeks to explicate communicative relationships between organizations and their diverse stakeholders, to review how they are operationalized and measured, and to illuminate their normative evaluations. This conceptual specification is guided by systematic sampling and content analysis of all primary research on organization-stakeholder relationships in the broader social sciences. Results of a comprehensive analysis of 74 articles suggest that studies overemphasize the business contexts, follow an instrumental orientation based on transactions rather than communication, and lack analyses of digital data. To explicate a PR understanding of digital communicative organization-stakeholder relationships, a definition is provided and a research agenda is offered on theory, measures, and blind spots.

1. Introduction

Relationships are core to communication science (Zaharna, 2016). There are broadly two fields that have a central interest in studying relationships between organizations and constituents: marketing and public relations (PR). The rise of digital communication technology has heavily impacted PR practitioners’ and marketers’ everyday practice, making the Internet “the key initial contact point for communicating with stakeholders” (Christ, 2005, p. 13). Digitalization is changing the communication game (Boyd & Crawford, 2012; O’Sullivan & Carr, 2017), and thus requires a re-examination of one of its fundamental building blocks. If a concept is so heavily studied as relationships are in PR, “it is important to pause periodically to reexamine assumptions basic to [relationship’s] conceptualization” (Heath, 2013, p. 426). Endeavoring to reconceptualize relationships is necessary as the conditions under which communication between organizations and stakeholders takes place have changed through digitalization (Stephens et al., 2017). Moreover, to mature as a field, PR is in need of a coherent theoretical synthesis (Nothhaft, 2016). Therefore, PR’s most basic concepts merit most theoretical attention, because they are widely used and thus impactful (Zaharna, 2016). Indeed, with an updated understanding of organization-stakeholder relationships in a digital setting, PR research can contribute conceptually also to other social sciences, stretching beyond the PR community (Nothhaft, Werder, Verčič, & Zerfass, 2018).

Communication in a digital environment possesses specific characteristics different from offline interactions (Parks, 2008). In the “digital age,” communication is a “fundamental condition […] of individual existence and social coexistence” (Jensen & Helles, 2017, p. 9), and constitutive of relationships (Shumate & O’Connor, 2010). Communication online is always mediated (Willson, 2017), the choice of channels depends on the relationship between the parties and relationships influence the channel choice (Chambers, 2017). Meta-data shape the content of communication (Trilling, van Klingsor, & Tsafati, 2017), and third parties, be it peers or monopolistic platform operators, affect relationships (Kwon, Kim, Sung, & Yoo, 2014), as the scandal around Facebook and Cambridge Analytica has vividly exemplified (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). In addition, communication can take on various forms: instant or delayed (e.g., chat vs. emails), many-to-many, many-to-one (Jensen & Helles, 2017), reflecting cultural ties or bridging them (Macy, 2016), relying solely on visuals (e.g., Instagram), one-time communications (e.g., Snapchat), and many more.

To clarify how digitalization has impacted the research on communicative relationships between organizations and their stakeholders (Freeman, 1984), PR’s narrow field of vision on relationships (Coombs & Holladay, 2015) is opened up. Thus, to reconsider concepts and
operationalizations of relationships in organization-stakeholder research from a meta-perspective, the following research question is asked: how are online communicative relationships between organizations and stakeholders investigated? The goals are threefold: to explicate communicative relationships between organizations and stakeholders in a digital communication context on a conceptual level (Chaffee, 1991); to identify measurements of these relationships on an operational level (Stephens et al., 2017); and to outline the normative assumptions on relationships (Rothenberger, Auer, & Pratt, 2017) for PR researchers. These insights allow to identify gaps in current PR research on relationships and to derive suggestions for future studies (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

To relate research with theory (Chaffee, 1991), studies that empirically analyzed organization-stakeholder relationships in a digital environment were sampled. A systematic review of all primary research published in the social sciences that measure relationships between organizations and stakeholders was conducted, resulting in a final sample of 74 articles. A systematic review allows to identify, appraise, and synthesize relevant studies on a particular topic from various databases (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & Group, 2009). Therefore, it does not underlie the selection bias of common literature reviews.

To guide this systematic examination, criteria for theory building and refinement established in political science (Thompson, 2008) and similarly in communication science were used. Conceptual criteria (concepts and their dimensions; Jensen, 2013; meaning analysis, Chaffee, 1991), empirical conditions (operationalizations, Stephens et al., 2017; empirical definition, Chaffee, 1991), and evaluative standards (normative assumptions, Rothenberger et al., 2017) of communicative digital relationships were analyzed. Thus, the construct under study (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017) is specified in a changed communication environment by conceptualizing digital communicative organization-stakeholder relationships and by proposing a research agenda for PR researchers.

The article proceeds as follows: marketing and PR understandings of relationships are synthesized, the different yet similar conceptions and measures are reviewed, and the role of communication in digital relationships is addressed. A detailed account of the method follows. Then, the findings are presented along conceptual criteria, empirical conditions, and evaluative standards. A discussion of the results leads to a section on future research avenues structured along theory and concepts, materials and measures, and blind spots. The article ends with conclusions.

2. Organization-stakeholder relationships in the digital age

2.1. Relationships between organizations and stakeholders: a brief synthesis

Studying relationships between organizations and audiences has been at the heart of communication research since the 1980s. Relationships and communication are reflexive and intertwined (Solomon & Vangelisti, 2010) and often research on relationships of organizations is communication-centered (Krone, Kramer, & Sias, 2010). The term relationship is used that comfortably that authors mostly do not engage in a definition, not even in encyclopedia entries (see, for instance, Heath, 2008; Parks, 2008). An exception is Jahansoozi (2006, p. 66) who, derived from interpersonal communication research, defines a relationship as “a link between [two or more people] that mutually serves a purpose over a period of time.” With the few definitions of relationships provided by researchers, one could get the impression that it has become a primitive term whose meaning is accepted as given (Chaffee, 1991). However, when applied in research practice, different communication studies have explicated relationships in their specific contexts with different underlying assumptions and meanings, rendering specific relationships such as organization-stakeholder relationships or relationship maintenance derived terms (ibid.). There are roughly two fields in communication science that focused on relationships between organizations and publics or stakeholders: public relations (PR; and related, yet separate from it, corporate, organizational, and strategic communication) and marketing. Despite relationships’ paradigm-status both in PR and in marketing studies, the concept of relationship, given its assumed “common meaning” in research as a primitive term, has not been properly defined (Huang & Zhang, 2015, p. 4).

2.1.1. Relationships in PR

In PR, relationships are considered central to the study of organizations and their constituents since the 1950s (Cutlip & Center, 1952). However, only when Ferguson (1984) demanded a focus on relationships did the concept attract prolonged scholarly attention. Notably, the idea is implicit in all dominant PR theories (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) as well as critical approaches (Heath et al., 2009).

Empirical inquiry of relationships picked up steam with Broom, Casey, and Ritche (1997) concept of organization-public relations (OPR) and later on relationship management theory (Ledingham, 2003), making it today the second most cited PR theory after excellence PR (Goombs & Holladay, 2015; Ki & Shin, 2015). One of the most commonly cited definitions of OPR reads: “the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics” (Broom, Casey, & Ritche, 2000, p. 18). Overall, OPR researchers have described relationships from a management viewpoint as the effective management of mutually beneficial exchanges in which organizations and publics strive for the same shared goals: “if it develops good relationships with strategic publics, an organization is more likely to develop goals desired by both the organization and its publics and is more likely to achieve those goals” (Grunig, 2006, p. 158f). This research line appears to share a common understanding of relationships, reflected by the fact that OPR researchers barely provide operational definitions of their main concept. Moreover, it remains unclear in OPR whether interpersonal communication concepts such as trust or satisfaction are relationship measures or relationship outcomes, most likely because it is not specified whether relationships are a process or a property (Ki & Shin, 2015).

2.1.2. Relationships in marketing

Similarly, the notion of relationships in marketing research originated in the 1980s, pronouncing a long-term focus on customer retention due to the high costs of attracting new clients (Berry, 1983). Morgan and Hunt (1994, p. 22), in their seminal article, define relationship marketing as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges.” In its basic assumption, consumers seek to reduce their choices of products and services in a market by entering a loyal relationship with a firm (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Relationships are thus described as an economic transaction between customer and firm, where information accompany the exchange process of goods or services. This exchange is regarded as relational per se, because every transaction extends beyond the particular instance (products are used after purchase, the value from a service is enjoyed after the immediate provision). Thus, even if customers do not desire to enter in a relationship with a company after purchasing a product or service, relationships occur, because value is coproduced between the customer and the service (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The most commonly mentioned benefits of this “dominant mantra” for the firm (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006, p. 136) are then lower transaction costs, higher margins and profits, and higher switching costs, amongst others (Ordanini, 2011). In this logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), relationship marketing is instrumental and focused on transactions.

2.1.3. Relationships in related fields

But relationships have not only been at the heart of marketing and public relations studies, indeed, organization studies have embraced this concept as well, and influential stakeholder theory characterizes
organizations at its core (Griffin, 2017). In its classic form, stakeholder theory is corporate-centric. Only recently has it shifted explicitly toward relational approaches (Buchholz & Rosenthal, 2005) that also include a communicative dimension. The classic definition of a stakeholder is “any group or individual that can affect or be affected by the realization of an organization’s purpose” (Freeman, 1984 p. 46). In organization science and sociology, interorganizational relationships are a central concept, usually focusing on the intentions of the relations between organizations. In fact, relationships are understood as links between organizations that pursue a mutual interest, while also keeping individual interests (Ebers, 2015). This idea of mutuality and the focus on behavior is likewise central to classic OPR and marketing conceptions of relationships. Particularly in OPR, behaviors are the focus, while communication is the tool with which the relationship is maintained (Ledingham, 2003). Similarly, communication is the accompanying process of transactions in marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

2.1.4. Communicative relationships

In alternative views in PR scholarship, namely critical and constitutive approaches, relationships and communication appear to be strongly interrelated, or even inseparable to some scholars (Heath, 2013; van Ruler, 2016). Here, relationships are not necessarily based on exchanges of goods and services, but on communication. Thus, rather than regarding information flows as an accompanying process of transactions, communication is the central tenet of relationships. This is illustrated in the term communicative relationship. Since relationships and communication are intricately interlinked, relationships are most distinctively described as defining communication (Zaharna, 2016). In the same vein, Winkler and Wehmeier (2018) have suggested regarding relationships as inherently communicational. Communication is used to reduce uncertainty between the parties in a relationship and relationships exist through “shared narratives of reciprocal expectations” (ibid., p. 147). These narratives are influenced by the history of the relationship, which determines the quality of communication (Kim, 2012). These ideas are picked up in communicative relationships from different angles of communication scholarship. Contrary to interorganizational relationships (Ebers, 2015), communicative relationships are not only the patterns and properties of relations between organizations, but focus on the communicative processes that bring relationships into being, no matter the intention. Originating in interpersonal communication, also scholars in PR started investigating the communication contents and variables under the label communicative relationships (van der Meer, Verhoeven, Beentjes, & Vliegenthart, 2017). In interpersonal communication, a communicative relationship requires that the parties in the relation are aware of the communication act (Burleson, 2010). This idea is applied to the communication between organizations and publics. In organizational communication, “communication […] calls relationships into being” (Bisel, 2010, p. 129). A related conception is the idea of “communication-as-relation” (Zaharna, 2016), where relations appear to define communication, and ultimately make up an organization (Blaschke, Schoeneborn, & Seidl, 2012).

Thus, communicative relationships are relationships between organizations and stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2010), both organizational or personal, that exist through communication, rendering communication the constitutive dimension of relationships (Shumate & O’Connor, 2010). Communication is therefore central to initiating, maintaining, and ending relationships that are centered on the exchange of information (Stohl & Stohl, 2005), the creation of alliances (Shumate & O’Connor, 2010), or for cooperation (e.g., Taylor & Doerfel, 2005), even more so in mediated environments such as the Internet. The assumption formulated in Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue that dialogic communication is inherently relational documenting how people relate with each other through communication is thus applicable to organizations (Barge & Little, 2002).

Thus, it is fair to say that the relationship concept is a dominant one in communication science and studies concerned with organizations and their stakeholders. Classic lines in PR and marketing research have understood relationships from a behavioral, instrumental, and business-centered logic, whereas alternative ideas in PR and organization studies have looked at the communicative core of relationships. Common to both, relationships have been lacking proper definitions, with implications for their operationalizations.

2.2. Measures of relationships

As Broom et al. (1997, p. 96) rightly note, “[t]he absence of a useful definition precludes measurement of organization-public relationships.” This is one reason why, given more than 30 years of study, relationships between organizations and audiences have been operationalized for various contexts in the different sub-fields, but mostly based on the idea that relationships between organizations and publics can be measured with the same concepts as relationships between people (e.g., Stafford & Canary, 1991; Zaharna, 2016). However, researchers have criticized applying micro-level measures to meso-level phenomena (Sha, 2017). A comparison of the foundations of interpersonal vs. organizational relationships shows that the factors underlying person-person relations such as a shared history, intimate tone, or synchrony are fundamentally different from those of organization-stakeholder exchanges (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Hence, an application of measures from one to the other at least demands caution. This transfer is even more critical in a digital communication environment, because online communication is mediated (Wilson, 2017), and personal interaction is not warranted, which leads senders and recipients to rely on assumptions about the other in interpersonal communication (Burleson, 2010). Since social media applications such as Twitter offer a many-to-many communication environment that is completely different from a one-to-one interaction (Jensen & Helles, 2017), some scholars have referred to the term “masspersonal communication” to describe a situation where personalized communication meets mass communication tools (French & Bazarova, 2017). Whether this distinction is an apt way of describing these communicative spaces is not the subject of this study, rather, its goal is to look at how communicative relationships between publics and organizations have been investigated on digital channels.

Despite the criticism of relationship definitions and the different understandings in communication science, scholars have measured relationships in marketing mostly based on interpersonal constructs of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and relationship quality (Palmatier et al., 2006). Similarly, most common operationalizations of OPR consist of trust, satisfaction, commitment, with the addendum of control mutuality (Hon & Grunig, 1999), openness and involvement (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), or reciprocity (Grunig et al., 1992). Hence, three central concepts in both fields – trust, commitment, satisfaction – stem from the interpersonal communication literature (see, e.g., Huang, 2001). However, PR research has been unconcise as to whether OPR is to be seen as a relational state or an interactive process (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998), while relationship marketing was born as an alternative to a single transaction view of buyer-seller relations (Palmatier et al., 2006).

Apart from these lines, there has been an antithetical body of research that conceptualizes relations between organizations and their publics from the perspective of dialogue (Rent & Taylor, 1998). This approach roots in philosophy, rhetoric, psychology, and stewardship theory (Waters, 2011). Dialogue measures have been widely applied, for instance, to websites studying virtual press rooms and journalists (Pettigrew & Reber, 2010); dialogue has also been conceptualized in social network analyses studying relations between governance bodies and their constituents (Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014; Himelboim et al., 2014). A review of OPR research found that in empirical studies, the factors constituting a relationship and its outcomes are often confused (Ki & Shin, 2015). Similarly, a review of relationship...
marketing observed: “there is little agreement among researchers as to which individual or composite relational mediator best captures the key aspects of a relationship that most affect outcomes” (Palmatier et al., 2006, p. 139).

Moreover, the methods applied (mostly survey research) and contexts studied do not show great diversity in both fields (Ki & Shin, 2015; Palmatier et al., 2006). Thus, OPR research has been accused of “conceptual and methodological laxity” (Huang & Zhang, 2015, p. 4), a claim not attached to relationship marketing research, despite – or because of - its monolithic concept of relationships (Palmatier et al., 2006). Thus, whereas PR research has been criticized for its limited theoretical impact on other social sciences (Nothhaft, 2016), marketing has been more influential.

2.3. The role of communication in digital relationships

Existing methods and measures of relationships between organizations largely do not account for the digital communication environment. The influence of channel characteristics on communication and the resulting channel choice (Chambers, 2017), the immediacy of communication, many-to-many communication (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Jensen & Helles, 2017), the influence of mediators (Frandsen & Johansen, 2015), and the loss of control, for instance, for crisis communication (van Zoonen, van der Meer, & Verhoeven, 2014), have not been researched widely.

Indeed, despite the fact that relationship concepts are measured with interpersonal communication constructs (Sha, 2017), the communication part of organization-stakeholder relationships has lost importance theoretically. Ledingham (2003), when introducing relationship management theory, makes the case for behavior as a focus of relationships rather than communication (van Ruler, 2016), following a shift from symbolic to behavioral relationships (Grunig, 1993). This lies in the history of viewing PR in an information exchange model of communication (Reddy, 1979). Thus, such a move from communication to behavior is conclusive in this perspective. Ledingham (2003, p. 188): “public relations functions such as special events, public affairs, development, and press relations are not—in and of themselves—communication.” This separation of behavior from communication resulted in viewing communication as the strategic tool of relationships, and management as the behavioral part. Certainly, the claim that “communication alone cannot sustain long-term relationships in the absence of supportive organizational behavior” (ibid.) cannot be disputed, but in the digital environment, digital communicative relationships are mediated, and come into being through communication (Bisel, 2010). Thus, regarding communication as the constituting and defining feature of relationships between organizations and stakeholders is more explanatory for phenomena in a digital environment, such as social media (French & Bazarova, 2017). To shed light on the concept of relationships in the digital age and how they are measured, our guiding research question asks:

RQ. How are online communicative relationships between organizations and stakeholders investigated (conceptualized, measured, and evaluated)?

3. Method: systematic review

The research question is answered by means of a systematic review, which increasingly finds entrance to communication research (O’Keefe & Jensen, 2009; Pecolo & Sharg, 2011). This method systematically synthesizes and categorizes primary research for the development of “midrange” theories (Bunn, 1993, p. 38). Contrary to literature reviews, systematic reviews provide a comprehensive overview of all studies in a specific research area by employing a systematic search strategy, pre-defined in- and exclusion criteria, and a content analysis conducted by two reviewers. Thereby, a systematic review on the one hand grasps all studies on a given subject, which is why it usually results in a large amount of articles for initial screening by the coders. From this large amount, a systematic review allows the researcher to narrow the relevant studies down to an eligible minimum. Thus, deep cuts from an initial N to a final N are the norm (see Fig. 1). Results obtained from a systematic review are reproducible, objective, and reliable (Moher et al., 2009).

3.1. Sample

Communication science papers on organization-stakeholder relationships are not solely published in communication journals, because communication researchers also choose neighboring social science outlets. Thus, peer-reviewed articles on five social science databases were searched systematically: Business Source Premier, Communication & Mass Media Complete, PsychINFO, Worldwide Political Science Abstracts, and Sociological abstracts. The search string was developed with the help of a specially trained librarian; it was based on the different concepts of interest of this study, namely “online,” “communicative relationship with organization,” and “measurement.” From these categories, the search string was refined referring to the PsychINFO thesaurus. The “measurement” part was not added to PsychINFO and Communication & Mass Media Complete, because after initial searches it imposed an unnecessary bias to the search results from these databases (search string in Appendix A).

3.2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The search was conducted on the 12th July 2017 and resulted in a total of 2799 hits. After removal of duplicates (14.81%), the abstracts of 2429 articles were screened by two independent coders according to pre-defined in- and exclusion criteria in the software Rayyan. Studies were included if they (1) measured a relationship (2) between an organization and another entity, (3) were on an online channel, and (4) empirical. Studies were excluded if they were on (1) interpersonal communication, (2) were book reviews, (3) commentaries, (4) encyclopedia entries, (5) editorials or essays, (6) literature reviews, and (7) not in English. The search in electronic databases was complemented – in a snowballing fashion – with references mentioned in the screened articles. This screening resulted in 147 articles for further consideration. The full texts of these articles were checked regarding the inclusion and exclusion criteria by both coders for final inclusion in the sample, which resulted in 74 articles (see Fig. 1 and the list of references of included articles). Consensus coding sessions were held between the two coders for discussion and agreement on conflicting codes.

3.3. Coding scheme & data analysis

The relevant articles were downloaded and coded using a pre-defined coding scheme (the data and supplementary material can be obtained from the author’s institutional repository: https://doi.org/10.21942/uva.c.4601831.v1). Besides formal variables such as author affiliation and journals, a range of content variables were coded (coding sheet in Appendix B). To clarify how communicative relationships are measured in the digital age, these content variables were based on Thompson’s (2008) account of theory development in deliberative democracy whose categories are also present in communication theory literature (Stephens et al., 2017; Jensen, 2013; Rothenberger et al., 2016; Chaffee, 1991). To provide a comprehensive understanding of digital communicative relationships from empirical research, the conceptual criteria that define a relationship between organizations and stakeholders were extracted for meaning analysis (Chaffee, 1991; Jensen, 2013), because “researchers must be clear about what practice they are investigating” (Thompson, 2008, p. 501). Here, the focus is on the different conceptions of relationships that might hint to a unified
common concept of relationships across research traditions (Blumer, 1954). This category included definition(s) of relationships, reference of definition, first reference given in theory section, concept of relationship, organization, stakeholder, and channel. Then, the empirical conditions, empirical definitions (Chaffee, 1991), or operationalizations (Stephens, 2017), i.e., the “set of conditions that are necessary for, or at least contributory toward, good” relationships (Thompson, 2008, p. 509) were coded with the variables: research design, method, sample size, unit of analysis, outcome variables, input variables, relationship measured as mediator/moderator, organizations’ relationship benefits, and stakeholders’ relationship benefits. This category refers to the operationalizations of relationships. Last, the evaluative standards that describe relationships ideally, thus, “[t]he closer the [relationship] comes to meeting the standards, the better it is in terms of [relationship] theory” (Thompson, 2008, p. 505) included: concept of relationship under study, the measure of relationship, source of the measure, and variables measuring the relationship concept. This category looks at the normative assumptions on relationships (Rothenberger et al., 2016). Findings were obtained from descriptive and correlational analyses in SPSS 25 and qualitative in-depth reading based on the extensive codebook. The unit of analysis of this study were the concepts of relationships, because some studies (n = 14) measured relationships with two or three different concepts. Thus, the sample for the empirical conditions is N = 95. Choudhury and Harrigan (2014), for instance, operationalized relationships as customer relationship orientation, customer relationship performance, and relational information processes. The second unit of analysis in this codebook is the article, to which the conceptual criteria, the evaluative standards, the formal variables, and the quality assessment referred (N = 74; complete list in Appendix A). The chi-square tests of independence tested for statistically significant differences between marketing (articles: n = 40, relationship conceptions: n = 53) and PR (articles: n = 28, relationship conceptions: n = 36). The remaining six studies were published in journals such as Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, not part of either of the two fields, and thus excluded from these analyses.

3.4. Quality assessment scale

Systematic reviews also include an assessment of the scientific quality of the articles under study, likewise performed by the two coders of this study. Quality was measured along selected indicators provided by the EPHPP Quality Assessment Tool (Ludolph & Schulz, 2015). A summative scale of the nine binary variables (including missing values for qualitative studies) coding research questions and hypotheses, the use of a representative sample, reporting of sample adjustments and response rates, controls, manipulation checks, debriefing, data analysis and access was calculated. Disagreements on single codes were resolved in coding consensus sessions. Since the EPHPP tool has been developed for quantitative studies, but the sample also includes qualitative designs, three coder rating items that assess the appropriateness of the study design, quality of communication, and study quality measured on a 3-point scale were added. For each of these items, the average between the two coders’ ratings was calculated. Taking these four averages (one scale summarizing and averaging the nine binary variables plus the three averaged coder rating items) together, this gives a summative scale ranging from 0 to 4 with an average study quality over all articles of 2.71 (Min = 1.33; Max = 3.67). Notably, only 16 articles reported as a sample representative of the population. Maximum points for quality were obtained by Grégoire, Tripp, and Legoux (2009) for their study on customer’s

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**Fig. 1. Flow diagram of the systematic review. Adapted from Moher et al. (2009).**
revenge and avoidance strategies after complaining publicly online. Least points were given to Park and Reber’s (2008) piece on Fortune 500 companies’ websites and their dialogue potential. However, this article is a so-called “short communication” in Public Relations Review, usually containing just a very brief account on methods, which explains the low number on the quality score.

4. Findings

4.1. Conceptual criteria: meaning analysis

To clarify and delineate the subject of investigation, researchers need to define its meaning. However, 18.92% of the articles (N=74) did not provide a definition of relationships; indeed, many studies defined the operationalized variables, but not their relationship conception. The most common themes in relationship definitions were interaction and behavioral outcomes, affective components such as trust or satisfaction, the idea that one party influences or impacts the other, the fulfillment of needs, and the maintenance of a relationship. Gummerus et al. (2012) relationship definition includes all but the influence dimension: “It is generally agreed upon that in order to create and maintain relationships between two parties both need to feel that they gain something […]. From a consumer point of view, engagement behaviors may thus be motivated by satisfying needs and gaining benefits from the behavior itself or from the overall brand relationship that is supported by the behaviors” (p. 860). Many authors, however, also referred to the necessity of “some exchange of influence” between the parties in a relationship (Ki & Hon, 2006).

The communicative part of a relationship was rarely explicitly present, with an exception of Chen and Lin (2015), who defined sustainable social relationships as “an assessment of the strength of a relationship, and the extent to which a relationship meets the expectations to maintain interactive and long-term communication with their customers or citizens and provide them with necessary information from blog operators and government agencies” (p. 42).

Definitions of relationships most often (n=22) referred to scholars from public relations (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Marketing studies most often cited Morgan and Hunt’s (1994) definition of relationship marketing, either them directly or indirectly.

In the general theoretical sections, however, some “classics” per field, i.e. older references that are cited often when studying relationships, were observed: Ferguson (1984) in PR and Morgan and Hunt (1994) in marketing. Apart from these lines, a myriad of different relationship conceptions emerged, which showcases their facets (see Fig. 2). The unit of analysis of this systematic review is the relationship conception (N=95). Fourteen articles applied more than one (with a maximum of three) conceptions of relationships, which were coded separately. The relationship conceptions under study were grouped into meaningful sub-clusters that represent the facets of relationships by concept mapping. Nine facets emerged.

”Relationship” clusters all conceptions that narrowly describe relationships between two parties, mirroring different contexts, i.e., banking relationships, those between customers and firms or brands, or buyer’s relational observations. The facet “Engagement/Commitment” summarizes conceptions that refer to the idea of engagement or commitment, having to do with motivations and drivers of involved parties (Gummerus, Liljander, Weman, & Pihlström, 2012). “Quality” refers to relationship conceptions that carry the notion of relationship quality, strength, or value that are often measured in terms of trust, commitment, and satisfaction (Roy & Eshghi, 2013). The facet “dependence” captures conceptions that focus on the interdependency between the parties in a relationship, the notion of “give-and-take” (Waters, 2011, p. 130), or reciprocity and relational dependence. Willingness to commit and buyer relationship formation were two conceptions clustered under “Initiation”, hence, conceptions on the inclination to start a relationship (Cho, 2006). Conceptions relating to the positive, usually instrumental profit-based, outcomes of relationships are clustered under “benefits,” such as customer relationship benefits or customer relationship performance (e.g., Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). “Communication” conceptions are those that relate directly to the act of communicating, such as dialogue or relational information processes. The facet “Maintenance” subsumes conceptions that focus on the cultivation of the state of relationships, such as relationship maintenance strategies or relationship marketing (e.g., Jo & Kim, 2003). Finally, corporate legitimacy and stewardship are two conceptions grouped under the facet “Responsibility,” because both demand organizations to act responsibly (Waters, 2011).

4.2. Conceptual criteria – organizations, stakeholders, channels

To specify the contexts in which relationships were studied online, the organizations, stakeholders, and the channels per article (N=74) were coded.

Most studies were on companies (n=52), consumers (n=32), and focused on consumer goods industries such as retail or food, or more broadly online shopping. Fewer were on small-and medium sized firms (n=3) and only one on the business-to-business context (Ordanini, 2011). Four studies were concerned with governmental bodies, and five included NGOs. Other primary stakeholders of organizations (Freeman, 1984) such as employees or investors were not covered. Students were subjects in nine studies; eight articles investigated “followers” on social media.

The sampled studies show a clear focus on established digital channels, such as the organization’s website (n=19), Facebook (n=16), or Twitter (n=11). Studies on websites and Twitter were significantly more frequent in PR than in marketing ($X^2(1, N=68)=9.88, p<.01$). This result for websites is plausible given the long-standing tradition of dialogue studies on websites in PR. No differences were found regarding analyses of Facebook, blogs, or social media. The category “Internet” (n=23) applied when the article was about online shopping and did not specify the exact channel (website or app). Thus, this channel was analyzed significantly more in marketing than PR studies ($X^2(1, N=68)=22.77, p<.01$). Internal communication platforms such as the Intranet or chat services such as Skype were not in the focus. Furthermore, visual social media such as Instagram were not studied. Gaming applications’ impact on retaining young consumers was analyzed once (Confos & Davis, 2016).

4.3. Empirical conditions

Empirical conditions are the operationalizations and methods of analysis of the relationship conceptions. The sampled studies (N=74) mostly applied quantitative methods to study relationships (n=62), with a clear dominance of survey research (n=41) followed by quantitative content analysis (17). While surveys were most often applied in marketing studies ($X^2(1, N=68)=20.37, p<.01$), PR researchers conducted significantly more quantitative content analyses ($X^2(1, N=68)=13.87, p<.01$). Field-based differences were not found for the other coded methods. Only three studies in the sample made use of mixed methods approaches. Although the focus was on online communication, only one of the six experimental studies was conducted online (Dantas & Carrillat, 2013). Apart from the scarcity of qualitative methods (n=9) such as qualitative content analyses and discourse analyses (n=5), and qualitative interviews (n=2), let alone ethnographic approaches or case studies, also the quantitative toolbox is underutilized. Only two studies applied a form of network analysis (Colleoni, 2013; Himelboim et al., 2014) and meta- and secondary data analyses are equally rare (Kozlenkova, Palmartier, Fang, Xiao, & Huang, 2017; Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, & Bezwada, 2012). Buyer relational observation and reciprocity were calculated based on the number
of other community members that the buyer followed and when this follower relationship was reciprocated for estimating a survival regression model (Kozlenkova et al., 2017). Rishika et al. (2012) operationalized relationship intensity in terms of customers’ visit frequency and analyzed it with propensity score matching difference-in-differences techniques. However, the large part of studies relied on scale measures of relationships (n=48), and codebooks were used second most frequently (n=11).

Despite the variety of relationship facets studied (N=95, PR and marketing only: N=89), the conceptions are often measured with the same underlying measurement constructs. Studies most frequently used trust (n=26), commitment and satisfaction (each n=23) to measure relationship conceptions. Those three were equally used in PR and marketing studies (X² (1, N = 89) = 0.30, p = .58; X² (1, N = 89) = 1.50, p = .22). This is likely due to the fact that OPR as well as relationship marketing and relationship quality are measured based on these three components, albeit with different compositions. These measures were most often adapted from Hon and Grunig (1998; n=9), De Wulf, Odekerken-Schroder, and Iacobucci, 2001; n = 8), Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann, 2005; n = 5), Morgan and Hunt (1994); n = 5), and Ki and Hon (1998; n = 4), all applying those three variables in one way or the other. Another frequently adapted measure was the dialogue concept by Kent and Taylor (1998); n = 4), which does not name the above three explicitly, but refers to engagement, which is close to commitment. Control mutuality (n = 7), the fourth component of the classic OPR measure (Hon & Grunig, 1999), was measured less frequently, but significantly more in PR than in marketing (X² (1, N = 89) = 11.19, p < .01). Two more PR-specific conceptions, which are significantly more used in PR than marketing, appeared engagement (X² (1, N = 89) = 4.57, p < .05) and dialogue (X² (1, N = 89) = 6.16, p < .05). Studies also referred to the variables loyalty and (relationship) value (each n = 4).

Seventeen relationship conceptions were studied with newly developed measures, not adapting existing scales or codebooks. There were no significant differences between marketing and PR studies (X² (1, N = 89) = 1.17, p = .28). Of these, five employ what could be called “truly digital” units of analysis, hence, units of analyses. These were born because of digital channels, such as digital data streams, cookies, meta-data, just to name a few. Romenti, Valentini, Murtarelli, and Meggiorin (2016) proposed an operationalization of online dialogic conversation based on replies to posts and tweets as measures of turn-taking, sequence organization, and repair strategies and procedures. Similarly, Ma, Sun, & Kekre (2015) used exposure to tweets and re-tweets to measure self-experience and exposure to other’s opinion. Follower relationships on online selling platforms were proxies for buyer-seller relationships in the article by Kozlenkova et al. (2017). Instead of using a scale, Clark et al. (2016) measured stakeholders’

Fig. 2. Nine facets of relationships.
engagement with symphony orchestras in terms of Facebook likes, shares, and comments. In a semantic network approach, Colleoni (2013) measured corporate legitimacy through networks of followers to corporate social responsibility-related tweets combined with semantic analysis of these tweets to make a statement on the congruence between stakeholder and corporate agendas.

4.4. Evaluative standards

“[E]valuative standards provide a basis for judging the quality” (Thompson, 2008, p. 505) of a concept under study, in this case, online communicative relationships. There are no commonly agreed on “ideals” (ibid.) of online relationships in communication science. But normative standards have a “pivotal role […] as a point of departure in rigorous communication-science research” (Rothenberger et al., 176). Thus, to formulate standards on which to evaluate whether a relationship is good, it is, on the one hand, referred to the goals of relationships as articulated by authors in relationship definitions and on the other hand to the gratifications that stakeholders and organizations may gain from relationships (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), as mentioned in the articles and operationalized in the dependent variables.

Most common is an instrumental notion that views relationships under the goal that someone gains something (Gummerus et al., 2012, p. 860), or to “convert indifferent customers into loyal customers” (Hsu, Wang, & Chih, 2013, p. 1030), thus propagating the idea that relationships have to result in a positive monetary or bottom line gain. Influencing and impacting “the economic, social, cultural or political well being” (e.g., Haigh, Brubaker, & Whiteside, 2013, p. 54; mostly referring to Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) of the other party is formulated as a goal, broadening the instrumental view as depicted by most consumer-oriented studies. Equally common was a status-quo notion of maintaining and enhancing relationships (Proença, Silva, & Fernandes, 2010). Some authors explicitly formulated that the “perceptions of how […] needs, expectations, predictions, goals and desires are satisfied” (Santouridis & Veraki, 2017, p. 1124) is the aim of a relationship. Only few named communication as a goal of relationship efforts (e.g., Clark, Maxwell, & Anestaki, 2016; Chen & Lin, 2015).

5. Discussion

This systematic review aims to synthesize knowledge on relationships in PR (Nothhaft, 2016), to clarify relationships in a digital communication environment and against approaches in neighboring fields such as marketing (Fisher & Aguinis, 2017), and to identify gaps in conceptual and empirical research to suggest future research directions (Booth et al., 2016).

5.1. Explicating digital communicative relationships for PR research

Conceptually, communication researchers do not agree on a common definition of organization-stakeholder relationships. Rather, different conceptions about relationships appear between the lines of research (Blumer, 1954). Contrary to the idea that “concepts unite, whereas conceptions divide” (Jensen, 2013, p. 204), some conceptual patterns that hint to a common understanding of a uniting concept of relationship in PR and marketing were found. Within the reviewed conceptions and in the nine facets of relationships, trust, commitment, and satisfaction are equally prominent. In general, however, PR researchers defined relationships more often than marketing authors did. This does not mean that PR dominates interpretations of relationships; it rather appears that, with the focus on behavioral outcomes, the marketing understanding of a relationship as a transaction is also prominent in PR. This influence of marketing on PR is not apparent in references to “classics,” where both disciplines seem to stay with their sources (resp., Ferguson, 1984; Morgan & Hunt, 1994), but it is more visible in the operationalizations.

Most empirical research is on a narrow corporate-customer nexus that does not even take into account more specific customer classifications such as older consumers. Other primary stakeholders are also neglected: no study in this sample analyzed investors’, employees’, or suppliers’ relationships with firms. Marginalized voices were subject in only one study (Coronado & Fallon, 2010). Moreover, there is a lack of B2B contexts, although they make up the lion’s share of business (Vargo & Lusch, 2011). In consequence, research on companies from heavy and controversial industries such as extractive (Coronado & Fallon, 2010), machinery, or oil and gas (Jo, 2005) is rare.

The dominance of corporate studies also shows a paucity of research on civil society relationships and the political realm. The relationship conceptions rather focused on behavioral outcomes of relationships between organizations and their constituents (e.g., facets “Engagement/Commitment,” “Benefits,” “Relationships,” “Maintenance”) than on communication (van Ruler, 2016). This narrow investigation of relationships in predominantly corporate-consumer settings limits PR’s understanding of relationships to this specific context (Heath, 2013). This results in an instrumental and business-centric view on relationships based on an exchange logic that marginalizes communication and communication science theories.

Thus, the focus of relationship studies is on the outcome. The emphasis on behavior shows that the communicative part of the relationship is blended out. This can be due to dominant logics in marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). There, customers enter a relationship with a firm after purchasing a service or product, if they desire it or not, because the value from the exchange lasts longer than the immediate transaction. This company-centric view accounts neither for the expectations/desires of customers, nor for the role of communication (van Ruler, 2016). The shift from understanding relationships as a communicative exchange to a behavior has led to the fact that communication is not made explicit in relationships any more (except for dialogue studies, Kent & Taylor, 1998), but rather seen as an accompanying feature as in marketing (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). This is antithetical to the developments taking place in a digital environment, where relationships exist through communication (Zabarna, 2016), because digital communicative relationships are mediated, and come into being through communication (Bisel, 2010). Thus, with a re-focus on communication, this paper contributes a PR understanding of digital relationships that is applicable also to non-corporate contexts.

Moreover, the systematic review showed that most definitions and studies are on existing relationships, how they can be nurtured, maintained, enhanced. Very few focus on the beginning of a relationship (facet “Initiation/Premise”), and none on the termination. This might be due to the fact that it is often unclear when an online relationship starts and when it ends. Cookie technologies and user-specific metadata make it possible for organizations to track website visitors before and after an interaction (e.g., a purchase) without them being aware of it. While in the offline environment a relationship began with an act of communication such as calling a telephone number of a customer service, and was then followed by a (customer-buyer) relation, in the online setting, following a brand on Facebook or a political party on Twitter can count as the start of a relationship (and the disliking or deleting an account as the end). Now, beginning and ending a relationship (unfollowing in this example) is not solely, but predominantly, in the hands of the stakeholder, not the firm. Thus, from a normative viewpoint the question is no longer how the firm can benefit, but shifts to the uses and gratifications of the stakeholder in the relationship (Katz et al., 1973) and requires awareness. Taking into consideration interpersonal communication theory (e.g., Burleson, 2010), the recent discourse in computer-mediated communication (e.g., French & Bazarova, 2017; O’Sullivan & Carr, 2017), and ideas around the constitutive function of communication formulated in organizational communication (McPhee & Zaug, 2009), the following definition is proposed:
Digital communicative organization-stakeholder relationships are interactions constituted through communication between organizations and stakeholders in mediated digital environments where all communicating parties are aware of the communication act.

By that definition, a communicative organization-stakeholder relationship begins only when there is awareness of the communication between the parties. Thus, tracking user data or establishing patterns of user personalities does not constitute a communicative relationship, while actively following a NGO does. Such a definition also marks a clear distinction from a marketing understanding of relationships that takes the perspective of the firm and is transactional. Here, a digital communicative organization-stakeholder relationship’s central tenet is communication, not the transaction.

5.2. Using meta-data to demarcate and study relationships

A lack of diversity in (digital) measurement emerged from the systematic review. Even though a plethora of relationship facets were observed, their operationalizations mostly refer to the same constructs, with trust, commitment, and satisfaction being in the lead in marketing and PR. However, mutuality, engagement, and dialogue as relationship conceptions were mostly (or only) found in PR studies. Often, relationship conceptions were labeled context-specific, however, at closer look, they were measured very similarly. The aforementioned three common measures all stem from the interpersonal communication literature (Ledingham, 2003; Zaharna, 2016) and have been applied to organizational contexts for a long time (Heath, 2013) such that their content validity is now taken for granted. As Kwon et al. (2014, p. 660) note: “[c]onsumers interact with brands in ways that parallel their social relationships.” However, in an online environment, channel characteristics are decisive for communication (Chambers, 2017) and communication is mediated (Willson, 2017), despite often being personalized. Thus, it is suggested to accompany such studies with digital data drawn from meta sources, such as visit frequency (Rishika et al., 2012) or follower relationships (Kozlenkova et al., 2017) that depend on the features of the respective channel. Meta-data indicate the beginning and the end of a relationship, for instance, a stakeholder following a NGO account on Twitter marks the beginning of the relationship, and the contents of the communicative relationship can then be analyzed with various methods such as social network analyses (Himelboim et al., 2014).

Relationship measures that are “truly digital,” i.e., that use meta-data, channel characteristics, or digital units of analysis, are in the minority, because most studies relied on survey data. In fact, only five papers could be identified that developed a new methodology to measure digital relationships. They took into account either follower relationships (Colleoni, 2013; Kozlenkova et al., 2017), or connections between tweets or posts (Clark et al., 2016; Ma, Sun, & Kekre, 2015; Rometi et al., 2016). The vast amount of visual data in the digital environment has not received researchers’ attention except for one study on Youtube storytelling (Pera & Viglia, 2016).

5.3. Normative assumptions for digital relationships in PR

Evaluative standards reflect what is commonly considered a “good” relationship (Thompson, 2008) and thus describe the norms underlying the research (Rothenberger et al., 2016). Prominent among the goals of relationship efforts was the instrumental idea that relationships are built to gain some monetary or other benefit, which is likely due to the majority of corporate studies and the influence of marketing. Many authors also pronounced maintaining the status quo as a goal; others rather saw the exertion of influence as a main aim; only few considered communication as a goal. The perspective of gratifications from communication exchanges did not evoke much attention (Katz et al., 1973), again pointing to a business focus. Thus, neither mutuality (Friedman, 2002) nor the constitutive function of communication (Shumate & O’Connor, 2010) have been considered in operationalizations. Digital communicative organization-stakeholder relationships depart from a different point, as they focus on stakeholders’ gratifications from relationships and regard mutuality from the point of view of communication.

6. A future research agenda

6.1. Theory & concepts: bringing communication back in

This paper proposes a definition of digital communicative relationships between organizations and stakeholders to clarify for PR researchers what they are researching (Thompson, 2008). The centrality of communication was not reflected in present studies, because most overemphasized communication as a means rather than an end (Pettigrew & Reber, 2010). Thus, a focus on mutuality and the constitutive function of communication is suggested here. However, studying such communicative relationships also needs to account for antecedents, moderators, and consequences that exist through digital environments: channel characteristics, digital data streams, and the influence of third parties, be it peers or monopolistic platform operators (Pigni, Piccoli, & Watson, 2016; Chambers, 2017; Willson, 2017). Our proposed idea includes meta-data as an indication of the start and end of relationships. Studying relationships as mediators of channel choice in communication (Chambers, 2017) is another interesting path to pursue. In general, given the paucity of studies that treat relationships as moderators, it would be enlightening to study the closeness of relationships (e.g., established through social network analysis) as a moderator for diverse message effects on Twitter, similar to the proposed network approach of strategic communication (Shumate & O’Connor, 2010). A further glance at relationship conceptions not rooted in interpersonal communication such as parasocial interaction (Coombs & Holladay, 2015) can help explain digital channel characteristics as antecedents or moderators. Alternatively, critical theory (Fuchs, 2017), taking into consideration concepts such as relationality (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000) or power (Habermas & McCarthy, 1977), can deliver a macro perspective on the consequences of such relationships.

6.2. Materials & measures: focus on the digital

The analysis of the operationalizations of communicative relationships has illustrated that specific channels and materials are under-studied.

Despite a “visual turn” (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016, p. 625), attention to relationship formation via visuals has been scarce. Furthermore, “truly digital” material such as digital data streams or digital images have barely been researched for measuring relationships (exceptions: Kozlenkova et al., 2017; Rishika et al., 2012). Meta-data such as location, user profiles, search histories, or links to peers bear a huge potential for understanding the formation of relationships in a digital environment that often is characterized by personalized communication. Digital data streams that result in large amounts of (real-time) data would allow communication researchers to identify unknown patterns of interaction and ultimately establish causal links (Macy, 2016).

To do so, researchers need to acquire new skills and use new methods to be able to analyze these data points. However, communication researchers do not necessarily need to study informatics to be able to analyze big data. This knowledge can either be acquired by cross-disciplinary collaborations with data scientists or information systems colleagues. Alternatively, researchers can make use of existing analysis software designed for commercial contexts, such as Google’s language API or Microsoft Machine Vision combined with a communication science interpretation of the output is a viable way to go.

Alternatively, insights into digital communicative relationships can be gained by looking at the micro-level and by analyzing specific cases,
or outliers, of relationship formation to build theory (Eisenhardt, 1989). Applying cyber-ethnographic methods (Ward, 1999) to understand the relationship formation between, for instance, terrorist groups and followers would be an interesting avenue for research; studying the argumentation patterns of influencers could be another one.

6.3. Blind spots: mutual benefits and power

Relationships online are easy to start, and easy to terminate. The proposed definition for digital communicative organization-stakeholder relationships suggests that both organizations and stakeholders need to be aware of a communication act to call it a relationship. In addition, meta-data can give an indication of who starts and ends a relationship when. However, these suggestions need empirical confirmation, particularly regarding the question how to define the end of a relationship, because from a marketing perspective, relationships can exist without the customer’s wish or awareness (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

This is particularly important because of the focus on non-positive relationships. OPR research has persistently followed the idea that relationships are often beneficial for one party, which usually is the organization (Heath, 2013; Avidar, Ariel, Malka, & Levy, 2015). This is even more prevalent in digital environments, where organizations have access to lots of data of their counterparts, for instance through cookie technology, with or without them knowing it. In addition, given the outstanding position of channel operators such as Facebook and the analyzable traces users leave behind (un-)willingly digitally, the question of power in relationships moves center stage. Concepts such as relationality could deliver new insights (Bradbury & Lichtenstein, 2000), as well as methods such as social network analysis to identify influential actors in a network of relationships. Network-based conceptions of communication and organizations are promising avenues for future research of inherently communicative relationships (Shumate & O’Connor, 2010).

New developments such as digital speech agents with which people communicate at home (Alexa, Siri) or on websites open up questions of whether relationships with such chatbots (should) have the same features as with non-digital parties and can be measured with existing constructs such as OPR.

7. Conclusions

With digitalization, the parameters of relationships between organizations and stakeholders have changed fundamentally and “the era of Big Data has only just begun” (Boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 675). Given this trend, organization-stakeholder relationships are in need of theoretical expansion and of new methods to study this communication digitally in large or small data sets. In an effort to connect research, theory, and societal practice, this article has explicated digital communicative organization-stakeholder relationships by defining the concept and its normative assumptions and demarcating it from non-digital parties and can be measured with existing constructs such as OPR.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubrev.2019.101829.

References


