

Managing Media Relationships Among Asian Organizations

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*Research Paper***Managing Media Relationships among Asian Organizations:
A Grounded Theory Approach****Liane W.Y. Lee¹; Leslie S.C. Yip¹; Kara Chan^{2*} and Bradley R. Barnes¹**¹*The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong*²*Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong*

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Abstract

Asian organizations need to engage media to establish trust and reputation. This research examines the phenomenon of press engagement, focusing on the relationship between public relations professionals of organizations and journalists. The study draws on both the public relations and relationship marketing literature to examine the efficacy surrounding various press engagement strategies. Eighteen in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists from broadcast, print, and online media in Hong Kong. The results were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Four press engagement themes emerged, including role reinforcement, responsiveness, social justice and segregation. These themes provide guidance for Asian businesses and organizations to develop their media relationship strategies. As there is no study that has investigated PR-journalist dyad relationships from the angle of the PR and customer engagement literature, this study offers new insights on organizational relationship marketing within a corporate communication context.

Keywords: Corporate communication, Public relations, Relationship marketing, Media practices, Grounded theory.

Introduction

Media is one of the most critical channels for PR professionals to manage (Coombs and Holladay, 2013; DeLorme and Fedler, 2003). It affects what consumers see and hear about an organization. Because of the influential power of media, an organization needs to cultivate media relationships through its PR function to gain exposure, present positive information and win public support. The media is generally receptive to information sources from an organization, which include press releases, interviews, publications and press conferences. Media endorsed organization news is important as such publicity is often perceived as a credible source among consumers (Jackson and Moloney, 2016).

The rise of digital press has enabled news to be consumed and shared at rapid pace, anywhere and anytime. Traditional news is being replaced by constant, real time news with the aim of attracting greater audience traffic (Fention, 2010; Hermida, 2010; Lee, 2015). Media companies i.e., the press, are facing challenges from increased competition stemming from digital media and at the same time are facing reduced audience and advertising bases (Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008). Journalists are often pressured to increase their productivity by producing more news in different formats, including text, video and interviews. As a result, journalists have less time for their usual news gathering practices, such as exercising news judgement, fact finding and interrogating sources (Jackson and Moloney, 2016).

Persistent pressure to produce breaking news and fill endless online news space, along with the constant need to monitor competitive activities, create immense pressure. Journalists can no longer operate within a cosy environment and observe freedom of press or independence (Jackson and Moloney, 2016; Lewis et al., 2008). McManus (1995; 2009) argues that the tendency to commercialize and maximize profit has hindered press independency and the media's role in serving the public's interest.

With the pressing need for greater productivity, journalists are increasingly rewriting existing materials from different sources, including press releases, wired news or other online generated content (Pettigrew and Reber, 2010). Harcup (2000) coined the phrase "churnalism" to describe this process whereby journalists recycle work from PR and wired news. Such stories require low effort in reporting, which is friendly to advertisers and often appealing to target audiences (McManus, 2009). Given the increasing influence of PR on journalism, Macnamara (2016) highlighted the need to conduct further research surrounding the journalism-PR nexus in this field.

PR professionals have frequently longed to engage journalists in a meaningful way and develop long-term relationships that can generate mutually beneficial outcomes. Rapid changes to the environment have led us to revisit the ways that both PR and journalists define "engagement" and how we should engage the press (Edelman, 2010; Devin and Lane, 2014; Meier, Kraus, and Michaeler, 2018). In PR studies, the majority of engagement research stems from three main public relations fields. The first, organization-public relations (OPR) studies have examined the formation of relations in PR settings. OPR focuses on the antecedents, followed by the maintenance or cultivation strategies related to the outcome of the relationship (Bowen, Hung-Baesecke and Chen, 2016; Broom, Casey and Ritchey, 1997; Gruning, 2006; Grunig and Huang, 2000; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001). The second public relations

stream relates to Excellence Theory (Grunig, 2006), which focuses on the two-way symmetrical model of communication, to develop a mutually beneficial relationship between the public relations practitioner and its stakeholders. Third, the Intereffication Model (IE) (Bentele and Nothhaft, 2008) examines relationships between the press and PR practitioners, looking at their co-dependency and mutually influential benefits.

The concept of engagement and value co-creation has received increasing interest among both PR and relationship marketing studies in recent times. Botan and Taylor (2004) described it as the most striking trend in PR over the last 20 years and is at the heart of PR research. Johnston and Taylor (2018) meanwhile expressed the need to advance our understanding relating to the measurement of engagement and advance our development of engagement tools. Macnamara (2016) calls for clearer rules of engagement between PR and journalists, as their role is rapidly converging. Similarly, customer engagement has attracted significant interest in relationship marketing studies (Marketing Science Institute, 2014).

In response to the call of McKie and Willis (2012), i.e., to improve disciplinary intersections in media relations through a complexity-influenced framework and to manage the rapidly evolving marketing communications environment (Keller, 2009), this study cross-fertilizes these two related themes of engagement and co-creation (Botan and Taylor 2004). We examine the phenomenon of press engagement under the lens of relational exchange between organizations and PR personnel (Broom, Casey, and Ritchey, 1997; Bruning and Galloway, 2003; Bruning and Ledingham, 1999; Ledingham, 2008) and its subsequent outcome of value co-creation between the exchange partners (Brodie, Fehrer, Jaakkola and Conduit 2019; Brodie and Hollebeek, 2011; Hollebeek, Juric and Ilic, 2011; Vargo and Lusch, 2008; Vargo, 2008, Vargo and Lusch, 2011). Using a grounded theory approach to examine Asian journalistic practices, the study aims to address the following research question:

RQ How can Asian organizations build effective and deeper media relationships?

Literature Review

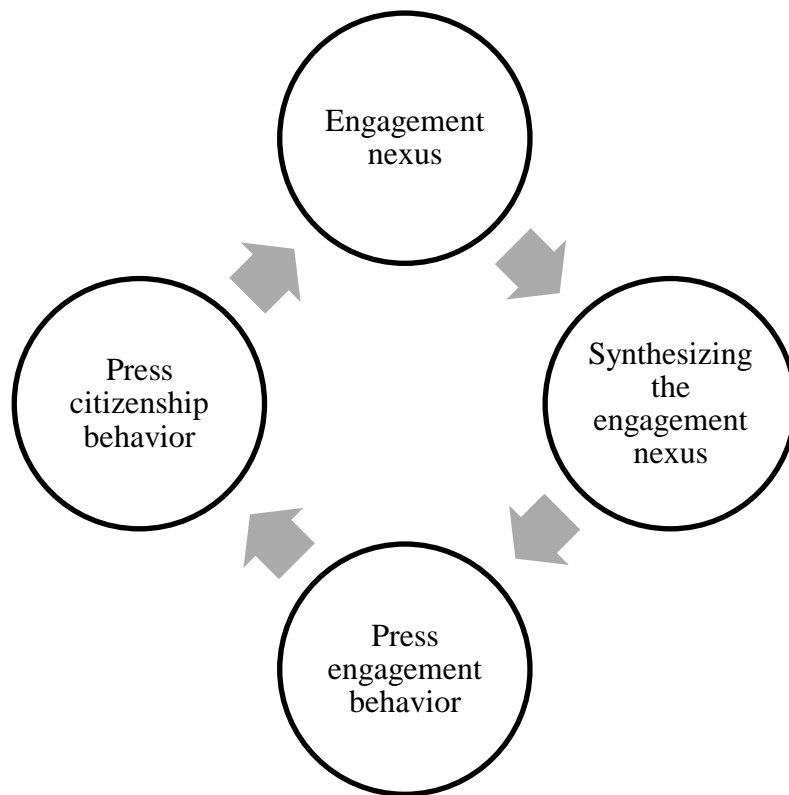
In reviewing the literature, we identified four key areas relating to the development of discourse surrounding the PR professional - journalist dyadic relationship. These are highlighted in Figure 1 and are discussed as follows:

“Engagement” Nexus Defined

Johnston and Taylor (2018) thematically identified a three-tiered measure of engagement. The first level, Tier 1, is considered tactical or low-level engagement. Engagement at this level consists of engagement that is multidimensional, relational and psychological. It involves connections, interaction, participation, collective action and shared knowledge (Johnston 2014). The outcome by and large is measured by activity levels such as counts or amounts, social media impressions, such as likes or visits and interacting with the content (Gvili and Levy, 2021).

Engagement measures in Tier 2 refer to moderate levels of engagement, measuring relationships such as trust, legitimacy or satisfaction, with outcomes that are more impactful i.e., cognitive, affective or behavioral. Measures of engagement at Tier 2 refer to a dynamic process in providing a conduit for information exchange and interactions that are equal, voluntary, constructive and well executed (Harrison and Muhamad, 2018). They may also relate to a balanced act of purposeful interaction, involving the exchange of resources at macro, meso or micro levels. In addition, they can also be collective, discursive, reflective, iterative, problem-focused, and action-oriented in the form of stakeholder engagement. Engagement in Tier 3 reflects the strongest level of engagement, with a focus on action and impact at a society level. Measures could be at a social capital level and may relate to social change, or action-resulting levels of engagement.

Figure 1: Discourse surrounding the PR Manager - Journalist Dyadic Relationship



The majority of engagement studies in the PR literature have been widely applied. Taylor and Kent (2014) identified the following uses in communication contexts: social media, employee, CSR, civic, social capital and dialogue. However, engagement has been rarely discussed in an organization-public relations (OPR) context, and in particular, press relations (Bruning, 2002; Bruning, Castle and Schrepfer, 2004; Ledingham, 2003; Zhang, 2012). OPR studies have tended to discuss the relational approaches of PR practice, where naturally, engagement should occur. OPR discusses the antecedents, followed by the maintenance or cultivation strategies of such relationships (Grunig and Huang, 2000), as well as the resultant outcome of the relationship. How engagement fits into the OPR context has yet to be explored.

The concept of engagement in marketing was pioneered by Vargo and Lusch (2004, 2008), coined as the service-dominant logic. Looking at it from a customer rather than a boundary spanner's perspective, the logic conceptualises customer engagement as a multi-faceted, psychological construct through episodes of social exchange between a dyad, to achieve a common goal (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić and Ilić, 2011). Marketing academics are also advocating expanding the scope of customer engagement within a business-to-business partner engagement context (B2B-PE) (Pansari and Kumar, 2017; Vargo and Lusch, 2011; Vivek, Dalela and Beatty, 2015). The authors advocate customer engagement should be expanded to involve key stakeholders that contribute to drive organizational success (Kumar and Pansari, 2016). 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).

In relationship marketing studies, items such as trust, satisfaction and commitment along with outcomes such as loyalty and positive word of mouth have been commonly used as measurement constructs in the PR literature. However, little has been done to bring these two areas together. Regardless of the euphoria of interest in the concept of engagement and its powerful outcome in both PR and marketing disciplines, there is almost no study that has explored the concept of "press engagement" between the journalist-PR dyad in an OPR context. Press relations is often mentioned as one of the benefactors in the OPR framework (Grunig and Huang, 2000), but only a few studies have examined the press engagement phenomena in an OPR context.

The Engagement Nexus Synthesized

From a review of both the PR and Marketing literature, it is observed that information asymmetry from the power-control perspective of a marketer appears less relevant in such engagement studies (Cornelissen and Lock, 2000). Instead, some commonalities have emerged surrounding the co-creation view in public relations (Botan and Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2001). In OPR studies (Ledingham, 2003), two-way symmetrical communication models have emerged in Excellence Studies (Grunig, 1998, 2006). There is also the intereffication model (IE) (Bentele and Nothhaft, 2008) and dialogue engagement studies (Taylor and Kent, 2014). All of these share similarities with business-to-business partner engagement (B2B-PE) (Vivek et al., 2021) and "customer engagement" (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2016). They have a common means for achieving successful outcomes of the relationship through continual, interactive, episodic exchange.

Furthermore, success in the outcome of the PR-journalist relationship is advocated in the six-dimensional aspects relating to the OPR outcomes of trust, commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality, communal relationship and exchange relationship (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Johnston (2018) considers engagement at an individual and social state, to encompass individual or collective cognitive, affective or behavioural engagement dimensions with an outcome of enhanced knowledge, motivation and interaction.

In business partner engagement studies, the dyad typically adjusts each of the episodic encounters to enhance mutually beneficial relationships in the long run (Xie, Bagozzi and Troye, 2008). B2B-PE also aims to achieve relational outcomes such as trust,

commitment, word-of-mouth referrals and behavioral intent (e.g. Brodie, Ilic, Juric and Hollebeek, 2013; Calder, Malthouse and Schaedel, 2009; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999; Kumar, Bhaskaran, Mirchandani and Shah, 2013). Both PR and marketing schools are making a conscious effort in developing long-term mutually beneficial relationships with similar, if not exact relational outcomes.

Press Engagement: Press Participation Behavior (PPB)

In defining the terminologies relevant to press engagement with public relations practices, we consider the former to represent the process of continuous episodic social and information exchange between the press and PR practitioners. The aim being to jointly deliver facts for the best interest of the audience and public at large. Our purpose is to understand the motivation which drives journalists to engage with PR professionals in long-term collaborative relationships. Lee et al. (2018) identified two forms of press engagement, i.e., press participation behavior and press citizenship behaviour.

Press participation behavior (PPB) reflects the level of intent in which the journalist wishes to be engaged in co-creating value with the PR practitioner. PPB consists of four dimensions - information seeking, information sharing, responsible behavior and personal interaction (Yi, Natarajan, and Gong, 2011; Yi and Gong, 2013). Information seeking refers to the extent in which journalists take the initiative to seek information from public relations practitioners (Kellogg, Youngdahl, and Bowen, 1997). In particular, it was found that most journalists seek information through electronic means, such as email, Facebook and WhatsApp groups.

Information sharing refers to the extent to which the journalist would clarify or share their information requirements with the PR practitioner, such as sharing additional information through the journalists' articles to inform audiences to understand the information subsidized by the PR practitioner. The second is sharing utility or work operation schedules, such as the availability to attend a press conference. Responsible behavior is the extent to which the journalist believes they are partial employees of the organization itself (Ennew and Binks, 1999), and respond to requests made by the PR unit, such as responding to phone calls or agreeing to read pitches. Personal interaction relates to the individual relationships formed between the practitioner and journalist in a social setting, such as considering the PR practitioner as his or her friend.

Press Engagement: Press Citizenship Behavior (PCB)

PCB consists of four dimensions - feedback, advocacy, helping and tolerance (Lee, Yip and Chan, 2018). Feedback is where the journalist provides directions to the PR practitioner to improve the quality of news, such as requesting for a one-one-one interview or asking for follow-up responses from the PR practitioner face-to-face (Lee et al., 2018). Advocacy is where the journalist provides positive word-of-mouth (Markus, 2005) for the PR practitioner, or in reverse, negative word-of-mouth as a reverse indicator of advocacy. Examples include sharing free movie tickets offered by a company as a lucky draw to readers by the journalist or reporting negatively on the behavior of an organization's spokesperson on their response in a crisis situation. Helping is where journalists assist and co-operate with each other to generate stories, such as sharing details of breaking news with fellow journalists who are late to the incident scene. Tolerance is where the journalist accepts the PR practitioner when he

or she cannot deliver the required information in supporting a news story. For example, one may provide justification why a company acted in a particular way, such as going against the interest of the public.

Methodology

The Sample and Procedure

To further understand the nature of press engagement in media relations management, this study examines the press engagement phenomenon in order to derive engagement strategies using a grounded theory methodology. Eighteen journalists working in Hong Kong were interviewed for this study. The initial participants were former graduates referred by the Journalism school of the researchers, and subsequent referrals by the participants. All except two participants were interviewed face-to-face. These exceptions were interviewed via telephone. The interviews lasted for an average of 90 minutes and we adapted Rao and Perry's (2004) eight-step interviewing process to ensure convergent validity. The journalists were from a broad range of press outlets in Hong Kong of varying size. They covered a diverse range of news. There were six females and 12 males. Three had 1-5 years of work experience, six had 5-10 years' experience, three with 10-15 years of experience and six had over 20 years of work experience. Profiles of the participants are outlined in Table 1.

The choice of using grounded theory lies in the fact that press engagement is a phenomenon that is highly under-researched. Although a study had been made as a first attempt from leveraging customer engagement studies, grounded theory allows theory to be discovered via delving deeper into the data (McCreadie and Payne, 2010). In order to generate the theory of press engagement in this study, grounded theory was used with support of NVivo (Creswell, 2017; Strubing, 2007). The interviews required journalists to recall their experiences, so they could describe their working relationship with PR practitioner(s) that they felt the most comfortable to work with over the previous 12 months. The history and background of the journalist-PR relationship, nature of the participation, type of engagement behaviour and engagement outcomes were used as guidelines during the interview process.

Table 1 – Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participant	News Beat	Channel	Job Title	Years of Experience	Gender
1	Business	Newspaper	Deputy News Editor	20+ years	Female
2	Classified	Newspaper	Editor	10-15 years	Male
3	Global News	E-News	Editor	5-10 years	Male
4	Global News	E-News	Editor	5-10 years	Male
5	Global News	Newspaper	Editor	5-10 years	Male
6	Politics	Newspaper	Reporter	1-5 years	Female

7	Legal	Newspaper	Editor	20+ years	Male
8	Lifestyle	E-News	Reporter	1-5 years	Male
9	Local news	E-News	Editor	5-10 years	Male
10	Local news	Newspaper	Chief Editor	20+ years	Male
11	Local news	Radio	Reporter	5-10 years	Male
12	Local news	Radio	Editor	10-15 years	Male
13	Local news	TV	Assistant Director	20+ years	Female
14	Local news	Newspaper	Senior News Editor	20+ years	Female
15	Sports	Newspaper	Reporter	1-5 years	Male
16	Sports	TV	Editor	20+ years	Male
17	Sports	E-News Magazines	Editor	10-15 years	Female
18	Technology	E-News	Reporter	5-10 years	Female

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the eighteen interviews were analyzed using the seven criteria for empirical grounding (c.f. Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The statements were analyzed line-by-line, categorized using three iterative sequential steps in grounded theory, i.e., an inductive open coding system in sequential and descending order of coded frequencies, followed by re-categorizing and grouping with axial coding, and then selective coding to derive the themes that emerged from grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The original scripts and categorized statements were then re-examined by two professors from the marketing and communication areas. Inconsistencies were discussed between the researchers before a consensus was reached.

Open and Axial Coding

Nine axial coded categories emerged. The first category, (n=162) related to “*negative aspects in PR*”. Reporters described instances when they were disengaged with a PR practitioner. One aspect is work professionalism, such as bad execution, no reply, mass email, wrong contact and failing to follow requirements. The other aspect was the ethical conduct of PR practitioners, such as lying, hiding, blocking or interfering with editorial output. These were the other reason for disengagement with PR professionals. The second category was “*reasons for using PR materials*” (n=151). Reporters adopt PR materials in situations when the information is useful, responsive and serves as an information subsidy.

The third category, “*professionalism*” (n=107) relates to the level of understanding that the PR practitioner has with the journalist. Examples such as “*does the PR professional think in my shoes?*” Does he or she provide good adequate support and background

information, a smooth interview process such as granting access to events and coordinate event timing all refer to professionalism. Fourth, “*gatekeeping*” (n=84) relates to the common role of editors as gatekeepers, but also includes screening and segregation with commercial content and advertisements. Fifth, “*media catching*” (n=81), relates to news generated by the PR unit, as well as new and novel hot topics on social media. Sixth, “*time*” (n = 69) relates to the time pressure faced by reporters and the urgency to verify the information source.

The last three, “*cooperation*” (n=68) outlined the cooperation between PR and reporters to support each other through offering gifts to readers and helping each other with frequent contact. “*Understand the role of PR*” (n = 62) refers to reporters understanding that the function of PR is to help a firm to improve the company’s image and provide news angles to protect the company. “*Firm type*” (n=60), refers to the process whereby reporters differentiate between different firms, such as whether it is a PR agency in-house, government or commercial entity, to determine the extent of engagement with the PR practitioner. “*E-news nature*” (n = 58) is the perceived importance of the channel means to the reporter. Finally, “*contact mode*” of PR practitioners with reporters such as email (n=57), “*news production*” such as accuracy (n = 40) and “*PR expected outcomes*” (n=38) such as the number of times names were mentioned in print. The results of word frequencies by word similarity, open coding and axial coding are presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 2 Word Frequency

Word	Frequency	Weighted Percentage (%)	Word	Frequency	Weighted Percentage
Public Relations	513	0.66	Incidents	75	0.08
News/Press	489	0.62	Reporting	51	0.06
Company/Organization	344	0.45	Information	51	0.07
Reporters	245	0.31	Contents	51	0.06
Questions	265	0.29	Email	50	0.06
Event	215	0.27	Sports	50	0.06
Situations	213	0.27	Impressions	50	0.05
Work	197	0.16	Opportunity	50	0.06
Like	188	0.24	Deciding	56	0.06
Necessity	150	0.19	Understand	47	0.06
Relationship	134	0.17	(News) Development	46	0.06
Special	150	0.19	Entertainment	45	0.06

Interviews	148	0.19	Method/Tools	45	0.05
Media	130	0.17	Time	43	0.06
PR agency	122	0.16	Colleagues	43	0.06
Arrangements	111	0.10	Apple Daily	43	0.06
Influence	101	0.10	(News) Angle	42	0.05
Advertising	124	0.16	Responsibility	41	0.05
Response	98	0.12	Explanation	40	0.05
Collaboration	82	0.11	Government	40	0.05
Phone Calls	78	0.10	Press Conference	40	0.05
Media Channels	77	0.10	Readers	39	0.05
Facebook	75	0.10	Role	37	0.04
			Websites	35	0.04

Table 3 Open and Axial Coding

Axial Coding Category	Open Coding Nodes	Frequency coded
Negatives of PR	Bad execution No reply Lie/hide/delay/lacks sincerity/ulterior motives Interfering with editorial output/blocking Commercial Mass email/wrong contact/irrelevant Hard sell/demanding Not following requirements Lacks knowledge Waste my time Collusion No news value	162
Reasons for using materials	Provide useful information (figures and statistics, related to my publication area, information provided timely) Response to my enquiry Information subsidy Popularity of news events	151
Professionalism	Think in my shoes Smooth process Good support Provides background information Many news angle/not pure promotion Coordinate timing of events Grant access to events Proactive, sincere	107

Gatekeeping	Editor as gatekeeper Pressroom/editor's direction Press room profit pressure Screen out commercial contents Censorship Segregation Conflict of interest Keeps distance Internal conflict	84
Media catching	Social media PR self-generated news Reporter's idea Novelty Hot topics on the internet Interesting/creative/meaningful/cross-over topics	81
Time	Saves time Verify Time pressure Non time bound	69
Cooperation	Gift to readers/reporters Production cost Help each other Events Contact frequently "Friendly" reporters	68
Firm type	PR agency / In-house Firm type: utility, government, NGO	60
Understand PR role	Enhance corporate image News angle to protect the company	62
E-news nature	Multiple channels Sensational Hit rates Desk-bound Generate news volume Fast-pace Short stories	58
Contact modes of PR	Lunch/dinner meetings Whatsapp Proactive approach Email, phone, whatsapp	57
News production	Accuracy and neutrality Newsworthy Production quality	40
PR expected outcomes	Reporter's attendance Mentions names in print	38
Firm's own advertising efforts	Advertorials Classifieds Integrated Marketing Custom publishing Supplements and features Firm's own channels	28
Relationship (Reporters with PR)	Long relationship Return favors	28

	Build network Preferential treatment Intimate Interpersonal relations	
Spokesperson	Identify a suitable spokesperson Friendly spokesperson Spokesperson skills	24

Results and Discussion

Four press engagement themes were derived from this study and are discussed as follows:

Role Reinforcement

The first theme, role reinforcement describes the need for public relations practitioners to fulfil the role requirements of journalists. Utilitarian needs, such as provision of up-to-standard press kits, following the reporter's requirements, meeting press deadlines, understanding the news beat they report on is one common theme that tended to emerge from the data. This builds on earlier work of Bentele and Nothhaft (2008) who signalled the importance in creating ready PR materials and adapting to deadlines to satisfy the symbiotic relationship between the two parties.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness and transparency, refer to the need for reporters to be able to obtain a response from the PR practitioner firm when they prepare for a news report. Responsiveness was coded 31 times, and providing useful information was coded 54 times. This echoes with the relationship cultivation strategies of Grunig (2006), providing "feedback" (Pansari and Kumar, 2017), and the need for transparency (Kanso, Nelsen and Kitchen, 2020). Such facets form an open and transparent relationship to effectively communicate and engage with the reporter. This also relates to the "time factor" identified by Kelly, Kerr and Drennan (2020), as it frees up time for positive engagement with the target audience.

In contrast to traditional thoughts of engagement tactics such as *role reinforcement* to fulfil relationship co-dependency and *responsiveness* by sharing tasks (Grunig, 2006), two new themes emerged from this research. They are social justice and segregation. This sounds like a dichotomy. However, these two engagement strategies are required to overcome the cognitive dissonance a reporter often encounters when engaged with PR practice.

Social Justice

Journalists face a state of cognitive dissonance in repelling public relations practitioners when the ethical duty of serving the public interest in reporting news are encountered. An example is when the PR practitioner is trying to block or hide the news, reporters will try to delve deeper in finding out what the firm is hiding from and reveals it on the news in one form or another. This finding is in line with the notion that journalism and

PR are “strained bedfellowship” (Macnamara, 2016), in a “love-hate relationship” (Sallot and Johnson, 2006) and that PR people may hide a company’s wrongdoing (Delorne and Fedler, 2003). This finding suggests press engagement should also include the concept of “social justice” in the journalist – PR relationship. The extent that PR supports journalists in providing the information to support news reporting and serve the public is an important measure to include. This finding is a more direct and substantial measure of *trust* as part of the engagement outcome than is commonly used in customer engagement (e.g. Brodie et al., 2011; Chen, 2017). It can also be a factor that drives journalists from active engagement to passive or even avoidance behavior (Kelly et al., 2020).

Segregation

Reporters are constantly aware of the influence from PR and will filter and examine the supplied materials to preserve the integrity of their news. Supplication of facts, such as charts, surveys, data, offering different news angles are examples used to support the journalist in reporting the news objectively. Segregation allows news media to develop content that attracts users, which in turn will also attract commercial organizations to advertise or promote through their PR efforts. PR practitioners reported an equal concern in “churnalism”. The majority reported the need to see balanced, independent and robust journalism, as “churnalism” reduces trust and the power of the message (Jackson and Moloney, 2016). This finding suggests segregation of a company’s promotional needs to ensure objectivity, which is crucial in satisfying reporters’ needs to serve the public. The mutual goal is to generate credible, trustworthy news that earns trust from target readers and builds up social capital and creditworthiness.

Limitations

The study collects data from journalists where a more comprehensive view could be obtained by interviewing PR practitioners as well. Being an exploratory study, further conclusive research with dyadic data collected for quantitative analysis would provide empirical support for the four themes that emerged in this study. The context of this study is specific and narrowly focused on the journalist-PR dyadic relationship. Journalists serve as mediators of the relationship between PR and the target audience. It would therefore be worthwhile to examine this mediating effect and its impact on the final audience as well as the direct effect between the PR firm, independent of journalist’s influence, and the target audience through other e-media channels. Such future research and their findings are likely to provide fruitful insights for both practitioners and scholars alike as they grapple to improve such PR company / journalist relationships moving forward.

Implications for Asian Business

This study provides insights for press engagement strategies within the context of journalist-PR relationship management and value co-creation. Evidence suggests that such approaches reflect on an unexplored phenomenon in both PR and marketing relational exchange studies. This study has provided qualitative data to support, conceptualize and operationalize such constructs. The theme, role reinforcement and responsiveness provide further empirical evidence of Grunig’s (2006) and Bentele’s

(2008) findings relating to proposed engagement strategies. Social justice and segregation are new press engagement constructs identified in this study. These strategies will alert PR practitioners of their professional code of practice when working with journalists. This may result in positive press outcomes, such as higher press coverage, better handling of bad press and crisis situations if proper press engagement strategies are deployed. These two constructs deserve further scale development to test and validate the multi-dimensional construct of press engagement and its' outcomes.

Since engagement demands exchange parties to share, integrate, and transform the combined resources to an outcome jointly beneficial to both parties such as the case of PR and the media, a pre-requisite for engagement such as relationship satisfaction, the exchange party's interest, motivation and a willingness to invest time are often essential (Dhanesh, 2017; Kumar and Pansari, 2016; Vivek, Dalela and Ahmed, 2021). Research in the PR and marketing disciplines have been working in similar areas of relationship management between the organization and its stakeholders, as well as focusing on different engagement strategies. The former has tended to concentrate on employees, media and the publics, while the latter on brands, customers and supply chain partners (Gesualdi, 2019).

The development of social media has enabled greater interaction between individuals, organizations and the public at large. PR and marketing personnel therefore need to constantly interact and manage the public audience and customer groups within different contexts. The boundary between PR and marketing is blurring. Convergence of the two functions creates the need and opportunities for close collaboration and learning, both from an intellectual level perspective and in practice. This study has attempted to examine and bring together the relationship and engagement literature. Through doing this, the findings can help PR practitioners to apply better press engagement strategies when working with journalists. This may result in positive outcomes, such as higher press coverage, better handling of negative stories or crisis situations if adequate engagement strategies are deployed. These constructs can facilitate further research aimed at developing new scales to test and validate these measures and their outcomes.

This study has explored the relationship exchange encounter between PR practitioners and journalists in an Asian context. Hong Kong, being the gateway between China and the West, primarily the G20 nations, places strategic significance on organizations to effectively engage public relations activities throughout Asia. To build up successful and strategic media relationships, Asian businesses should be responsive and consider social justice and segregation concerns when working with journalists.

They should respect the professional practice of journalists in requesting open and prompt responses, especially when handling crises. For example, organizations may consider having dedicated staff to respond to media enquiries and monitor social media on a 24-hour basis. They should also realize that journalists are often likely to be somewhat detached from them and may play a 'watch-dog' role in protecting the society and public at large (Kalyango Jr. et al., 2017). Instead of treating journalists as an extension of their own organizations, practitioners should include the media as an important stakeholder in terms of their corporate social responsibility practices.

The membership of local public relations professional bodies in Hong Kong, such as the Hong Kong Public Relations Professionals' Association Ltd and China International Public Relations Association, are still somewhat at an infancy stage, with less than 30 years of established practice (CIPRA 2022). PR as an academic discipline was not recognized in China until 1995. The first Ph.D. programme specializing in the area was not launched until 2014 (Choy and Huang, 2021). Domestic firms in China view public relations as government-oriented corporate strategies, propaganda and publicity (He and Tian, 2008; Lock and Ludolph, 2020) rather than a tool to genuinely engage and influence the public (Zhao, 2022). There is a need to establish professional accreditation and continuous learning development programs to enhance the reputation of public relations professionals in this region. The curriculum contents should include core features highlighted in this study, such as responsiveness, social justice and segregation.

Furthermore, the blurring boundary between PR and marketing stems from the expansion of advertising agencies in Asia to converge social media marketing, advertising and PR functions. Advertising agencies have been acquiring public relations firms. Chinese practitioners in particular, are more "open-minded" or "market-oriented" to both types of PR and advertising functions as there is a growing tendency to focus on efficiency, declining advertising expenditure and placing greater reliance on social and digital media (Xie, Neill and Schauster, 2018; Tong and Chan, 2020). The emergence of these cross-integrated functions creates the need for local PR professionals in the Asia region to be inter-disciplinary and understand the integrated marketing communications nature of combining marketing, advertising and public relations practices per se (Kitchen and Tao, 2005).

Moreover, PR-journalist relations in this region are becoming more influenced by the social status of traditional news media. PR practitioners are able to bypass the traditional gatekeeping functions of a journalist due to the increasing popularity of social media and content marketing to reach their target audiences (Qiu and Lou, 2022; Zerfass, Verčič and Wiesenber, 2016). Regardless of such a shift, this study has revealed that professionalism, social justice and segregation are all key constructs for building effective PR-journalist relationships. Organizations are also reminded to provide professional materials for journalists in a timely manner, to further enhance credibility and enhance their relationship status.

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