PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER ASSESSMENTS OF THE ROLE ENGAGEMENT PLAYS IN ORGANIZATION TO PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

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ABSTRACT

Stephanie L. Mahin: Public relations practitioner
assessments of the role engagement plays in organization to public relationships
(Under the direction of Lois Boynton)

Engagement has become a popular concept in public relations research with the rise of social media. Attempts in scholarships have been made to measure engagement's effectiveness of various public relationships. However, scholars have not settled on a common description and theorizing about the complexity of engagement has been slow. In addition, practitioners have been missing from the scholarly conversation about engagement.

This research relied on the in-depth interviews of twenty public relations practitioners from healthcare, higher education, sports, self-employed, and software technology industries to provide a thorough understanding of the term's day-to-day use and how it is evaluated to help organizations develop stakeholder relationships.

The findings serve as a roadmap for public relations scholars and practitioners. Practitioners are encouraged to take a more-sophisticated approach in thinking about what engagement means for their organization by considering that engagement efforts triggers stakeholder emotion or encourages stakeholders to act. Scholars are urged to re-conceptualize complex interpersonal theories to gain a better understanding of the role engagement plays in organization to public relationships.

To the Universe

Thank you for conspiring to help me reach the end of this journey.

To my grandparents, Clinton and Velma Alexis Crayton and Ada Brassfield,

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Wish you were here.

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“Engagement is like love–everyone agrees it’s a good thing, but everyone has a different definition of what it is.”

—Jeffrey Graham, Twitter’s Global Head of Research

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the last line of Star Trek, The Next Generation Season One, Captain Jean-Luc Picard, commander of the Federation Starships, states to his crew, “There's still much to do; still so much to learn. Mr. La Forge—engage” (IMDb, 2016). In fact, Picard is well known for instructing his crew to “engage” after charting the next course for the starship Enterprise. This action-oriented example of “engage” implies to “move into position” or “activate.” This represents only one of a multitude of meanings for “engage” or “engagement.”

Reversing course back to this century, a Boston technology group hosted a roundtable session for nonprofit communication professionals in which the speaker, from the local National Public Radio station, described her session in the following way:

> You know them, you hate them: those annoying on-air fund drives for your local National Public Radio station. But NPR stations face new challenges—as radio listenership declines and listeners migrate to online streaming and downloadable podcasts, our ‘annoy till you give’ strategy is running out of time. We have to learn how people engage and give in a digital context, and fast. (NTEN, 2016)

This statement from WBUR’s Lisa Williams captures what many communicators in the nonprofit, for-profit, and government sectors currently face with their various stakeholder groups. How do we engage them? Even more, they are asking, what is engagement? How do we engage in an environment driven by computer mediated communication? The question then becomes, has engagement, which is widely applied across industries and contexts, become corporate jargon like “empower,” “move the needle," or "corporate value" (Forbes, 2012)—terms that hold little to no tangible properties. Or has it been adopted as a permanent part of the corporate lexicon?

Currently, there are more than 100,000 LinkedIn employment openings available at organizations around the country that have included some variation of engagement in the job title or as part of the position's description. For example, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America sought a Director of Latino Engagement who would, "focus on developing and managing key partnerships and collaborations to enhance PPFA's efforts to reach and work with Latino communities through public policy, advocacy, communications and digital efforts" (LinkedIn, 2016). Another organization searched for a Brand Engagement Director and offered this as a description of the position: "The Brand Engagement Director will develop strategies and lead the execution of employee-focused programs to drive brand-lead culture inside organizations" (LinkedIn, 2016). Yet another advertisement for California-based Manhattan Associates read:

> The Engagement Director will be responsible for managing Professional Services & Consulting and Sales support for Manhattan Associates' supply chain software products for the Latin America group. They will oversee profit and loss/revenue goals and manage multiple inter-dependent projects. This individual will also manage the professional services team, oversee complex budget management, manage executive-client relationships, and inspire process innovation from team. (LinkedIn, 2016)

Finally, Amnesty International USA posted a job opening for a director of Online Engagement, a position in which the individual would:

> . . . oversee AIUSA's social media, email engagement, and production staff, and works in close partnership with the Web and Media teams. As a member of the leadership team within the Digital and Strategic Communications department, the Director of Online Engagement helps shape and drive the organization's broader communications strategies. (LinkedIn, 2016)

These employment listings represent four very different job functions and each defines engagement as establishing partnerships, supporting sales, or developing strategic communication. The term engagement is never clearly defined in all four examples.

Whether it is the year 2006 or 2017, the term engagement has proven to be a broad, ill-defined term that is often used to describe itself. Engagement is used as an umbrella term that carries associations with words like participation, interaction, persuasion, dialogue, connection, and commitment. While these associations exist within academic literature, it is unclear whether engagement is a permanent part of the lexicon of practitioners and if so, how they describe elements of the term. Within corporate communication contexts, engagement (i.e., stakeholder, employee) is widely discussed as a benefit for an organization's business practice. Deloitte and Touche, a tax, consulting, and financial advisory organization, defines stakeholder engagement as a process the organization uses "to engage" relevant stakeholders to achieve organizational outcomes (Deloitte, 2014). BSR, a global nonprofit organization, stresses that stakeholder engagement integrates diverse stakeholder feedback into every aspect of the organization's operations. BSR suggests the stakeholder feedback process produces collaborative, inclusive, and strategic opportunities (Enright, McElrath, & Taylor, 2016).

Additionally, professional associations (e.g., The Public Relations Society of America, The International Association of Business Communicators, International Public Relations Association) have taken interest in engagement and have taken time to inform communication professionals about the latest trends occurring with engagement in the field. From teaching CEOs how to engage stakeholders online to helping employees understand how their work performance influences the success of the organization, communications are viewed as an important organizational function;

therefore, discussions about engagement show no signs of slowing. A recent trade article's headline read, "Building the right relationships through social engagement . . . " (Castro, 2012).

The aforementioned definitions of engagement closely resemble one-way and two-way communication approaches examined throughout the public relations scholarship. Chaffee (1991) explains that clarifications of terms help link the conceptual world with the real world. To date, the engagement phenomenon has yet to factor in the real-world perspectives of public relations practitioners. Currently, there remain gaps between the professional use and understanding of engagement and the various definitions found in public relations scholarship. This dissertation lends itself to fill that void.

Problem Statement

Public relations is both a profession and an academic field (Botan & Taylor, 2004). For decades, establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and stakeholders has been *the* most valued and studied management function of public relations (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1994; Ledingham, 2003). Of equal value to the profession is finding ways to measure program impact and outcomes (Wright & Hinson, 2015). However, with the emergence of technological advancements, attention has shifted away from traditional management functions focused on only meeting organizational goals and toward more relational, or relationship-centered, models of communication that factor in the needs of both the organization and its stakeholders (Ferguson, 1984; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000). Historically, organizations have maintained control of the relationships with their stakeholders and managed how information was disseminated to them and decisions were made concerning them. However, the shift turned in favor of recognizing the essential role public relations plays in relationship building in a civil society (Taylor, 2010). Part of that role is to recognize that publics and societal groups should be partners with organizations in the meaning-making process (Botan & Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 2010). From this perspective, public relations can help organizations engage their communities, and more.

In some ways, this shift has highlighted the term "engagement," which has become a popular concept in which to measure its effectiveness of various public relationships (e.g., employee engagement, public engagement, consumer engagement), particularly with recent developments with social media engagement (Men & Tsai, 2014; Oh, Bellur, & Sundar, 2010). Regardless of how the term is used, practitioners and scholars seem not to have reconciled on a common description. For example, Men and Tsai (2013) explored the types of public engagement with Chinese corporations on social networking sites without ever explicitly defining engagement. On the other hand, Smith and Gallicano (2015) examined Millennials' public engagement with organizations online by settling on one of many existing definitions.

Theorizing about the complexity of this concept has been slow. Kiousis (2002) notes Chaffee's argument, "without explication, our words are nothing more than words, and our data add nothing to them" (p. 356). Researchers warn without a clear conceptual definition developing valid operational measures for empirical evaluations is difficult, misapplication of the concept will occur, or there is risk involved with drawing conclusions without measuring the actual concept itself (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

This dissertation research allows the discussion of engagement to unfold from the practitioners' standpoints. Understanding their perspectives of how the term is used day-to-day and how it is evaluated makes a valuable contribution to scholarship.

Additionally, this research attempts to broaden the conversation about engagement and its role in building relationships between organizations and stakeholders. Taylor and Kent's (2014) conceptualization of engagement in public relations literature shows that the term is generally presented as a form of one-way communication, represents an effort by organizations to do something above and beyond normal communication behaviors, and demonstrates that engagement can help organizations to build public relationships. These examples raise questions about the disparate definitions that researchers currently use. For these reasons, Taylor and Kent's examination of engagement is worth broadening by adding the public relations practitioner perspective.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to allow public relations practitioners to describe the characteristics of engagement, understand how practitioners use the term, and evaluate how these professionals engage stakeholders as part of day-to-day practice. While literature outlines various theoretical features of engagement, perspectives from public relations practitioners are missing from the research. Gaining an understanding varied perspectives of practitioners or meanings they hold about the term will add a valuable layer to the literature and help scholars better theorize about the term. In a practical sense, extending theoretical explanations of engagement by hearing directly from and analyzing different professional perspectives can be useful for organizations interested in cultivating relationships with various internal and external stakeholders. That said, to do this, I will gather research data through in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners from various business, government, and nonprofit sectors.

An outline of the dissertation is as follows: Chapter 2 provides an overview of the long, rich history of public relations and the evolution of organization—public relationship perspectives over the years. Chapter 3 examines engagement from internal and external stakeholder, and dialogic communication perspectives. Chapter 4 reviews the literature on how technology has influenced communication within the field of public relations highlighting discussions of social media engagement and drawing distinctions between engagement and interactivity. The Methods section, Chapter 5, describes the benefits of conducting a qualitative analysis for this type of research. The chapter outlines how the research questions will be addressed through in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners. Chapter 6 explores the themes and categories that emerged from the interviews and lays out an analysis of the study's findings. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes with a discussion of the results, an examination of practical implications for professionals, and considerations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: PUBLIC RELATIONS PERSPECTIVES

As a field that values strategic communication to manage relationships between organizations and their stakeholders, public relations is a tale of two worlds. One world embraces a functional view of public relations as a communication activity that creates favorable information about organizations and uses cultural elites, like the media, to disseminate that information and accomplish the organization's goals (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Motion, Heath, & Leitch, 2016; Taylor, 2010). The other world is concerned with co-creation—establishing multidimensional, multi-layered relationships where the process of meaning making is shared with the community (Heath, 2013; Taylor, 2010). These split perspectives raise questions of whether traditional ways of thinking about relationships from an organization-centric model can advance the field in ways that also are for the good of society instead of only benefiting the organization (Fawkes & Gregory, 2000; Heath, 2006; Ihlen & van Ruler, 2007; Yang & Taylor, 2015;). Chapter 2 discusses the two worlds that have divided public relations research and practice. Within this section, both the functional and co-creational approaches by scholars past and present are introduced. Additionally, the chapter opens the discussion of dialogue as a way to co-construct meaning through interaction with stakeholders and other groups (Broome, 2009) by public relations researchers particularly as they redefine "relationship," "relationship management," and what it means to practice 21st century public relations.

Organization-Centric Perspectives: A Functional Approach

Communication activity used as a strategic management function within public relations practice has evolved over the years. Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed the four models of how organizations use communication to strategically influence and/or build relationships with stakeholder groups. The models include: publicity/press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical. Press agentry and public information are one-way models of communication used to persuade and inform and are not concerned with stakeholder input. The organization is at the center of the relationship in this model and controls the creation and dissemination of favorable messages about the organization. Press agentry is seen as propagandistic and public information is seen as journalistically fact-based but still avoids negativity about the organization. Conversely, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical approaches to communication accept stakeholder feedback. With two-way asymmetrical, the organization solicits information from stakeholders in order to understand their perspectives so the organization, in turn, can develop strategies to convince stakeholders to support the organization's point of view on issues. The organization is not committed to changing its own attitudes, values, or actions, and stakeholder groups have little input in actual decision-making processes. Finally, the two-way symmetrical model is considered to be the most ethical and socially responsible way for organizations to communicate with stakeholders. Stakeholder groups become a part of the decision-making process even as organizations strive to reach their missions, goals, and objectives. Organizations commonly blend press agentry, public information, and two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical approaches into their practice at a given moment (Grunig, 1992).

Hired by the International Association of Business Communicators, James Grunig (1992) examined characteristics of excellent communication departments and how excellent public relations produces effective organizations. His Excellence Study, while influential to research and the field and often credited for setting the foundation for understanding two-way communication and symmetrical communication (L.A. Grunig, J.E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002), has not been without its critics.

Two-way symmetrical communication was proposed as an ideal approach for the field of public relations, which critics have called a utopian ideal that may not accurately represent organizational behavior (Grunig, 2001; Plowman, 1998). Grunig and his colleagues (L.A. Grunig, J.E. Grunig & Dozier, 2002) along with Murphy (1991) countered the argument by suggesting practitioners more frequently adopted a mixed motives method, which led to the mixed-motives model in public relations practice. As such, the combination of symmetrical and asymmetrical tactics creates a win-win zone. While "in the zone," each party in the relationship maintains their own self-interests though it is in the best interest of everyone to cooperate in order to find common ground. Plowman (1998) developed mixed-motive strategies for public relations that span across the two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models. Strategies include bargaining, negotiation, mediation, compromise, accommodation, avoidance, withdrawing, competition, contention, cooperation, and collaboration.

Jelen (2008) suggested scholars have been preoccupied with studying public relations management efforts and perspectives that drew from and relied heavily on the Excellence Theory (derived from the Excellence project). Jelen said doing so has stagnated the profession preventing public relations research and theory from advancing. Over time, the profession evolved with the idea that practitioners should focus their efforts on negotiating, building, and strategically managing relationships with various stakeholder groups on behalf of organizations, hence, the growing interest in organization—public relationships.

Organization—public Relationships

Ferguson (1984) argued that cultivating relationships *with* stakeholders, rather than talking *at* stakeholders, should be the primary focus of scholarship and the profession. Her work marks the beginning of relationship management research; public relations theories established over the last two decades have emphasized relational approaches informed by interpersonal communication, which examines relationships from cognitive and behavioral perspectives.

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) stated the public relations profession needed a generally understood and common definition of "relationship." "Without clearly explicated concepts [like relationship] researchers cannot make empirical observations and construct meaningful theories" (p. 13). Public relations scholars pursued help from other disciplines as they searched for an appropriate definition. For example, one approach to defining relationships is as exchanges between partners that dynamically change over time and vary with interactions (Broom, et al., 1997; Capella, 1991; Chia, 2000; Wong & Hung, 2008). Again, many of the definitions used by public relations scholars were adapted from examinations of interpersonal communication literature.

Interpersonal communication theories provide rich considerations of how parties interact with each other to develop trust and close connections. For this very reason, recent criticisms from public relations scholars have surfaced about adopting interpersonal theories to organization to public relationships (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). While interpersonal theories typically reference intimate relationships between individuals, I argue there remains great benefit for public relations scholars to reexamine these complex theories and re-conceptualize them as a way to expand our understanding of organization to public relationships. Knapp’s (1978) Stages of Relational Development, for example, depicts how typical relationships between intimate partners progress over time through communication, from the small talk stage to the commitment stage. Progressive stages like these can offer additional and unique perspectives for public relations research and the profession about how organization to public relationships are molded, grown, and perhaps dissolved. I argue in favor of applying more interpersonal communication concepts like Knapp’s to public relations research. This argument is not simply about applying the model, but expanding models like Knapp’s to realize overlooked benefits to further advance understandings of organization-public relationships among internal and external stakeholder groups. Increasing these understandings can lead to the cultivated relationships with stakeholders of which Ferguson (1984) refers. The interpersonal communication discipline has already informed much of the relational approaches in public relations, however, applying appropriate existing models has been an approach less used.

Knapp’s Relational Stage Model

Knapp’s (1978) dual staircase model draws elements from Emerson’s (1976) social exchange framework in which an economic-oriented model of exchange characterizes communication patterns and behaviors that can at times develop into loyal and trusting commitments (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). These shared commitments, however, involve a series of interactions that depend on the actions of the other party. Therefore, during various stages of the relationship, individuals seek to maximize their benefits and minimize their losses (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959), which means they enter and leave relationships based on how fair they believe those rewards and costs are for them (Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013). The greater the rewards, the more satisfied an individual is in the relationship (Knapp, 1978). These benefits and costs are reflected in the ten stages of Knapp's staircase model (see Figure 1). The five stages of coming together include: *initiating*, *experimenting*, *intensifying*, *integrating*, and *bonding*. The five stages of coming apart include: *differentiating*, *circumscribing*, *stagnating*, *avoiding*, and *terminating*. Knapp and Vangelisti (2009) stress relationships that come together or come apart are neither good nor bad since either can happen for various reasons. As Figure 2 illustrates, each step on the staircase leads to the other and movement can occur sequentially, forward or backward, but always to a new place, and can occur quickly or slowly. Each step serves as groundwork for another step. For example, as a relationship moves forward (coming together), it moves toward greater intimacy between parties; however, as individuals decide to step back from the relationship (coming apart), it moves further away from intimacy and toward disengagement. The steps are explained in detail in Table 2.

Figure 2. Knapp's Stages of Relational Development Model (Knapp, 1978)

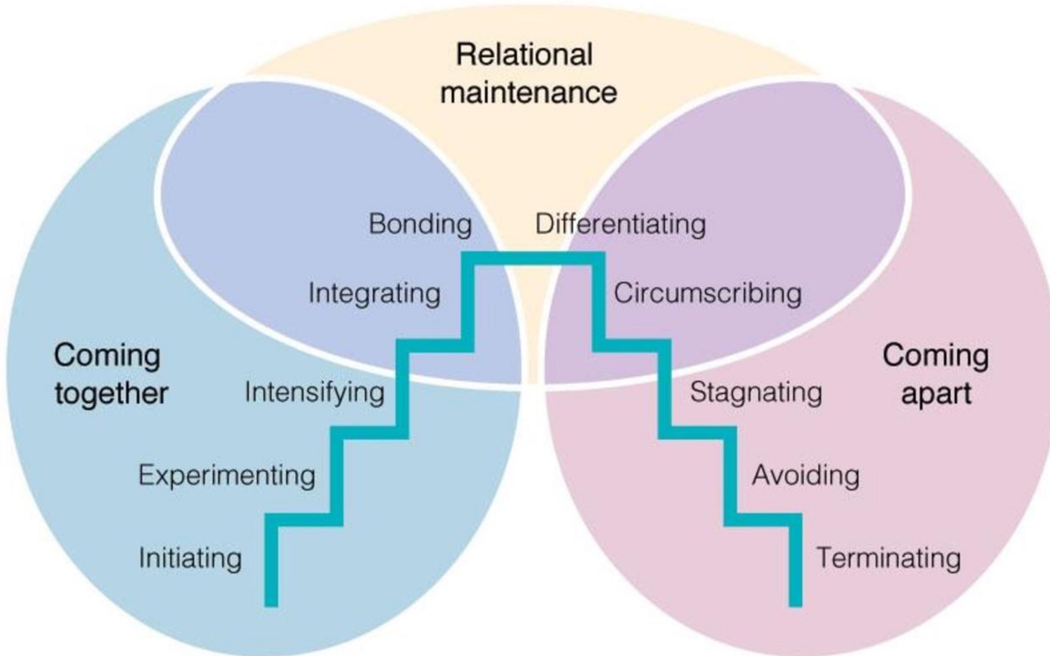

Figure 2. Knapp's Stages of Relational Development Model. This figure illustrates the steps of how a relationship between intimate partners come together and come apart.

Table 2

The steps within Knapp's (1978) Stages of Relational Development (Fox, et al., 2013; Velten & Arif, 2016)

Steps	Definition
Initiating	The first interaction or making the first impression.
Experimenting	Individuals are trying to find common interests and shared experiences.
Intensifying	Signals that the relationship has blossomed, a certain level of comfort sets in and relational commitment begins to manifest although individuals can remain at this stage for years and never make a solid commitment.
Integrating	Coupling, or fusion begins to occur.
Bonding	Refers to a public announcement of the commitment to the relationship, or an institutionalization of it.
Differentiating	The uncoupling stage.
Circumscribing	To the level and quality of information exchange between parties decreases.
Stagnating	The communication between parties has ended.
Avoiding	Interaction between parties is prevented.
Terminating	Ending the relationship.

Knapp's (1978) staircase model provides considerations for a more robust conceptualization of the development and management of relationships within an organizational context and the cultivation of organization to public relationships. The five steps of coming together (*initiating*, *experimenting*, *intensifying*, *integrating*, and *bonding*) have the most promise for adding another layer to scholars and practitioners' understanding of engagement's role in a relationship.

In this next section, I attempt to briefly demonstrate the possibilities of expanding Knapp's coming together model of relational development.

Application of Knapp's model.

As previously outlined, the coming together steps include initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding.

To demonstrate application of the model used within an organization context: Once an organization hires an employee to join its workforce, traditionally the employee is introduced to the organizational culture, mission, and policies through an indoctrination process called orientation. The orientation process can be considered the first impression that both parties have of the other, or the initiating, "getting to know you" step. As the employee settles into her or his work role, the employee begins to meet other employees within their business unit and the organization and find common interests and shared experiences among those other employees—this can be considered the experimenting step. Once the employee has mastered her or his work role and over time, experiencing promotions, and accepts additional work responsibilities and maybe even joins organizational committees, the evolution resembles the intensifying step on Knapp's model. Intensifying signals that the relationship has blossomed and a certain level of comfort has set in. Knapp suggests that parties can remain at this stage in the relationship for years, which could relate to issues with employee retention the organization may experience if the employee begins to feel her or his needs are no longer being fulfilled. The integrating stage leads to the coupling or fusion stage, and can indicate that the employee is willing to go "the extra mile" for the organization with her or his involvement. The level of involvement can be in or out of their assigned work role. This process can resemble employee longevity—employees who devote their careers to specific organizations. Finally, the last step in Knapp's coming together model is bonding. Bonding refers to the public announcement of the commitment to the relationship, which in an organizational context can point to the moments of employee recognition expressed by the organization. For example, employee of the month celebrations, an employee of the month premium parking space—anything that demonstrates appreciation for the employee's dedication to the organization. Additionally, bonding can resemble the employee being gifted a service recognition award of a watch with the organization's logo, which she or he wears faithfully.

While the criticisms are that organizations are not real entities and therefore cannot build close relationships with individuals, Knapp's model can, however, be useful for providing the organization with a greater understanding of the nature of their relationships with stakeholders and suggest the progression (or coming apart).

That said, as the public relations field continued to evolve, more attention was paid to organization—public relationships and less on the practice of persuasive messages.

Dimensions of Organization—public Relationships

The addition of relational viewpoints to the public relations field shifted the practice away from merely influencing public opinion through messages and toward initiating, developing, and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000). Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) defined organization—public relationships as, "patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics" that are "dynamic in nature," and can be "tracked over time" (p. 19). This helps to place the relationship at the center of public relations research and practice. Since the shift, scholars have focused on constructing theoretical concepts and models that identify the dimensions of relationships (Broom et al., 2000; Bruning & Ledingham, 1998; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; 2000). Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 2000), for example, identified *trust*, *openness*, *investment*, *involvement*, and *commitment* as dimensions that can influence behaviors in a relationship (see Table 2.1). Ledingham and Bruning suggested these variables produced stakeholder loyalty toward the organization and vice versa.

Table 2.1

Dimensions of Organization—public Relationships

Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 2000)	Hon and Grunig (1999)
Trust refers to the belief that those in the relationship can rely on each other	*Control mutuality* is the degree to which parties agree on the sharing of power.
Openness is making an effort to be transparent	*Trust* is the willingness to open oneself to the other believing that the organization is fair, will do what it says it will do, and that it has the ability to do what it says it will do.
Investment is the time and energy it takes to build the relationship	*Commitment* is the belief that the relationship is worth it.
Involvement means parties becoming involved with the problems and problem-solving process	*Satisfaction* is each party feels positively about the other and the relationship.
	Communal relationships mean both parties are concerned for the other and provide benefits based on the other's need and expecting nothing in return.
	Exchange relationships focus on the giving and receiving of benefits based on past or future actions of comparable benefits.

Hon and Grunig's (1999) widely used evaluative scale measures the perceptions of the public relationship from the viewpoints of the organization and key constituents based on *control mutuality*, *trust*, *commitment*, *satisfaction*, and *communal* and *exchange relationships*. The last two dimensions, communal and exchange relationships, reflect the types of relationships public relations programs aim to achieve and emphasize the giving and receiving of benefits between parties. Communal relationships are particularly important if organizations desire to be socially responsible and add value to society (Rhee, 2004).

Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) and Heath (2006, 2013) stressed the need for theories that reflect the growing complexities of organization—public relationships and the need for these relationships to be explored from a societal perspective (Yang & Taylor, 2015). Duhé (2012) stated that relationships established and maintained on behalf of the organization should have benefits that overflow into society. These considerations of a new approach with broader perspectives took the focus off of the organization.

Societal Perspectives: A Co-creational Approach

Traditional public relations thinking that organization—public relationships occur between one organization and one stakeholder group clashed with views that those relationships instead occur among many stakeholders (Heath, 2006, 2013). Specifically, societal views of organization—public relationships countered ideas that organizations should maintain control of information that serve and promote narrow interests. Heath suggests a paradigm of public relations focused on building and sustaining healthy communities, or what he refers to as fully functional societies where formal and informal rules are created by both parties and motivated by what is good for society rather than only what is good for organizations. In fully functioning societies, public relations is at the center, and social relationships develop between organizations, stakeholders, and other societal partners, which in addition to creating norms, produce trust and provide information (Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Taylor, 2010; Yang & Taylor, 2015). In fully functioning societies, relationships are co-defined and negotiated (Heath, 2013).

Even as researchers reexamine the role and value of public relations in a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006), communication technologies have changed the new media landscape. Communities of networks or what boyd [sic] (2007) refers to as publics, are groups of individuals who share similar worldviews and values, and are interacting, sharing, and filtering information across the internet with or without input from organizations (Motion et al., 2016). Publics can freely access the information they seek.

As a result, internet technology has caused a dramatic shift for practicing modern public relations. For example, no single organization has privilege over the actions and meanings on social media and no one voice can dominate digital spaces (Bruce & Shelley, 2010); therefore, new media bring a different set of complexities to relationship-building efforts. Primarily, organizations can establish relationships with multiple publics and thus individuals can choose to be members of more than one public simultaneously (Heath, 2006, 2013; Leichty & Springston, 1993). Scholars and practitioners recognize social media are innovative tools with which to reach multiple groups (Kang, 2014; Men & Tsai, 2014; Smith & Gallicano, 2015). Therefore, it is illogical to think that one size fits all when cultivating relationships online. As a result, one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many communications have become important interpersonal and social communication models to revisit. Regrettably, academic research of various social media channels including Twitter and Facebook have found that organizations still rely on the one-to-many model that employs one-way communication strategies (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

In summary, the heartbeat of the field of public relations has been to establish and manage relationships between organizations and their internal and external stakeholders and to involve them in business strategies that help meet organizational objectives (Grunig, 1992). Relational communication perspectives have dominated public relations theory development with ways to accomplish this goal. For more than three decades Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations (i.e. publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical), and Grunig's (1992) Excellence Theory, which characterizes effective public relations, have informed various other theories.

Scholars have expanded ideas from functional perspectives where practitioners strategically use communication messages to manage public relationships to more-progressive relationship-focused perspectives where organizations and communities participate in meaning-making that results in mutual growth, understanding, and respect between partners using dialogue (Broome, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 2002).

The use of dialogue between partners has been an important realization for gaining better understanding of relationships and relational perspectives. What follows is a close examination of how scholars define dialogue as communication.

Dialogue as Communication

Public relations scholars have explored dialogue to help explain how meaning is constructed through the interaction between partners in a relationship (Broome, 2009). While the goal is not to appear as *the* solution to a situation, the effort also should not disguise covert agendas or imbalanced power relations (Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006). As a result, dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor, 1998; 2002) has emerged in public relations as a way to provide practitioners a more focused approach to understand how dialogue can help the field expand its understanding of relationships and relational perspectives. Many of the viewpoints rooted in dialogue point to an ideal form of communication (Broome, 2009; Stewart, 1978) to which organizations and their stakeholder groups should aspire. Dialogue emphasizes listening and inquiry on the part of participants, and “speaking so that others want to listen; listening so that others want to speak” (Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006, p. 345).

In the communication discipline, Johannesen (1971) defined dialogue as, “communication [that] is not a one-way transmission but a two-way dialogic transaction” (p. 373). Dialogue consists of relational attitudes, principles, or orientations that individuals hold with each other during interactions (Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Johannesen, 1971; Kent & Taylor, 2002). Cissna and Anderson (1998) consider dialogue to be a communication exchange that occurs between two or more people.

Dialogic theory is rooted in the work of philosopher Martin Buber (1958) who conceptualizes two types of relationships between people as *I-It* and *I-Thou*. The *I-It* interaction points to the persuasive, self-centered, and exploitive nature of the speaker or observer *(I)*. In this communicative act, there is no mutual exchange involved in the relationship because the speaker *(I)* is not interested in feedback from the other *(It)* unless the speakers’ viewpoint is furthered. The other, therefore, is seen as an object manipulated for the communicator’s own interests. Hence, the relationship lacks mutual trust and the communication can create a deceptive, pretentious, and exploitive relationship that exhibits a communication exchange characterized by prestige, persuasion, and power (Broome, 2009; Johannesen, 1971). These features closely resemble an organization’s decision to employ publicity and public information as its approach to communicate with stakeholder groups. The organization controls and disseminates the message and is not interested in feedback from stakeholders.

By contrast, in the *I-Thou* relationship, the speaker *(I)* acknowledges the uniqueness of the other *(Thou)* and is concerned with experiencing the other side's perspectives (Anderson & Cissna, 2009; Broome, 2009; Johannesen, 1971). Both communicators are interested in exchanges that reflect directness and spontaneity. Dialogic partners have mutual respect for each other, which in turn encourages mutual growth and development. What is described as an *I-Thou* relationship reflects more of the two-way symmetrical model of communication in public relations. Communicators who use this model have the goal of managing conflict by soliciting stakeholder feedback in order to promote mutual understanding and negotiate solutions (Plowman, Briggs, & Huang, 2001). See Table 2.2 for other features of dialogic communication that reflect symmetrical approaches.

Table 2.2

Features of Dialogic Communication (Anderson & Cissna, 2009; Broome, 2009)

Feature	Description
Genuineness	Directness, honesty, straight-forwardness; avoiding facades.
Accurate empathic understanding	Seeing the issue from the other's point of view.
Unconditional positive regard	Valuing the other person's uniqueness and individuality; mutual trust.
Presentness	Avoiding distractions and bringing full concentration to the encounter.
Spirit of mutual equality	Viewing each other as people, not as objects; avoiding superiority and power.
Supportive psychological climate	Allowing free expression; listening without anticipating, interfering, competing, refuting, or warping meanings.

Building on Buber's (1958) work, Holba (2008) identifies three types of dialogic communication: 1) *genuine dialogue*, 2) *technical dialogue*, and 3) *monologue*. Briefly, *genuine dialogue* is the ideal form of communication that keeps the other in mind, with the intention of establishing mutual relations between self and others. Next, *technical dialogue* is a direct response to a functional need in the communication, or a communication encounter that fulfills a specific purpose such as a greeting. Finally, *monologue*, which is often disguised as dialogue, is essentially a one-way conversation between two individuals. Anderson and Cissna (2009) underscore that the problem with monologues is not that the person fails to hear a message; rather, they fail to listen to the message as an active participant in the communication encounter. Buber never promoted dialogue over monologue. Instead, he found value in both types of communication and suggested they both bring value to an interaction, though differently. In the end, "genuine communication relies as much on difference and gaps between people as on the friendly sounding goal of interpersonal closeness or bonding" (p. 6). The potential value of both monologue and dialogue can be seen in the mixed-motives model of public relations (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2001; Murphy, 1991; Plowman, 1998).

Buber's (1958) early explanation of dialogue focused on how individuals could move toward more meaningful and genuine interactions. Because dialogue is rooted in interpersonal communication, the assumption is that dialogue occurs as a person-to-person interaction rather than organization to stakeholder group (Taylor & Kent, 2014). However, as scholars explain, dialogue's value of interpersonal interaction and emphasis on meaning making, co-creation of reality, and understanding, mirror the goals of public relations to create, negotiate, and maintain relationships among stakeholders (Botan, 1992; Taylor & Kent, 2014). That said, dialogic partners strive for mutuality, which involves interconnectedness and collaboration (Kent & Taylor, 2002), though Cissna and Anderson (1998) warn not to mistake mutuality for equality. The scholars maintain that no relationship has complete equality. Theunissen and Wan

Noordin (2012) argue, for example, public relations managers have been less likely to relinquish control over a communication situation even though it is required to achieve dialogue. Hence, the focus of dialogue should be on the quality of the interaction more than the end result, which resembles the purpose of true debate—for the communicator to better understand their own and the other party's perspectives (Kent & Taylor, 2002). "Dialogue is a dimension of communication quality that keeps communicators more focused on mutuality and relationship than on self interest, more concerned with discovering than disclosing, more interested in access than in domination" (Anderson, Cissna, and Arnett, 1994, p. 2). Consensus, however, does not mean dialogue has occurred. As Kent and Taylor (2002) explain, "dialogue cannot . . . make an organization behave morally or force organizations to respond to publics . . . [but] a dialogic communication orientation does increase the likelihood that publics and organizations will better understand each other and have ground rules for communication" (pp. 24, 33). Because dialogue can explain the quality of communicative exchanges (Cissna & Anderson, 1998) and is dedicated to truth and mutual understanding (Taylor & Kent, 2014), dialogue is an attractive form of communication to public relations practitioners.

In their seminal article, Kent and Taylor (1998) ignited discussions about dialogic communication in the field of public relations around the time computer-mediated technologies had advanced. Specifically, the authors explained how the internet could advance public relations practitioners' ability to create online dialogic spaces to build lasting relationships with stakeholder groups. Kent and Taylor suggest dialogic communication is relationship-focused, allowing a "negotiated exchange of ideas" (p. 325) between organizations and stakeholders with the end goal of ethical communication that leads to openness and respect between parties. They proposed five strategies for web designers to create online spaces for cultivating lasting dialogic relationships with stakeholders. The model includes allowing feedback from audiences through a dialogic loop, providing valuable information that is easy to navigate, encouraging visitors to repeatedly return to the site, and keeping them on the site. Since Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002) developed this dialogic framework, subsequent studies have attempted to determine whether or not organization websites support dialogic features (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011). Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) argued that the more an organization depends on its stakeholders to achieve its mission, the more the organization needs to design and utilize dialogic features on its website; however, dialogue through the internet is a difficult task. Most nonprofits, for example, have done well to design websites that meet basic technical requirements; however, many do not show they are committed to engaging in dialogue with their stakeholders. For instance, after examining the Facebook pages of environmental groups, Bortree and Seltzer (2009) stated that advocacy groups were missing a significant opportunity "to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders" (p. 318). Waters (2007) indicated that the top nonprofit organizations incorporate a variety of web-based communication strategies to connect with current and potential donors that help nonprofits meet fundraising and philanthropic goals.

For-profit organizations also have struggled to employ the dialogic principles conceived by Kent and Taylor (1998). Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) investigated online relationship building by examining the use of Twitter by Fortune 500 companies to facilitate dialogic communication. Companies committed to providing ongoing opportunities for dialogue engaged more of their users (i.e., they were able to conserve visitors) than companies that did not take a similar approach. While companies often failed to provide useful information for stakeholders, apart from basic branding information and links to the company website, the authors argued that facilitating interpersonal communication between a company representative and stakeholders on the site was a more important effort.

Additionally, in the field of higher education, practitioners use web-based tools as an important part of their communication and relationship-building strategies (McAllister, 2012). After analyzing dialogic principles on community college websites, McAllister-Spooner and Kent (2009) found sites that tapped into some of their sites' interactive potential such as having useful information online, easy navigation, encouraging return visits, and providing a means for dialogic feedback, were strong predictors of dialogic communication. Additionally, McAllister (2012) found that communication professionals in higher education make a distinction between the value of website and social media tools to build relationships. They believe providing information is the most-important function of their websites, while social media is best used to engage and interact with specific stakeholder groups (i.e., potential students).

In an effort to expand and strengthen their initial web-based perspectives of the value of dialogic communication, Kent and Taylor (2002) provided five underlying dialogic principles specifically for the public relations field: *risk*, *mutuality*, *empathy*, *commitment,* and *propinquity*. A brief explanation of each principle follows:

Risk relates to a willingness to interact with stakeholders on their own terms and involves being open to unanticipated experiences and consequences, which in turn means being vulnerable. And while there may be great relational risks between parties who engage in dialogue, there may also be great rewards.

Mutuality acknowledges that organizations and stakeholders are interconnected and interdependent. It involves collaboration and equity with others.

Empathy relates to an atmosphere of support and trust. Practitioners experience “walking in the shoes” of their stakeholder groups.

Commitment describes characteristics of dialogic encounters such as genuineness, authenticity, commitment to an ongoing conversation (not to sway the other but as a way to understand them), and commitment to trying to interpret what others say and feel. There is willingness from participants to work and struggle to understand the other’s viewpoint.

Propinquity involves real-time interactions and a focus on a continued and shared future between dialogic partners. “Publics are consulted and considered on matters that affect them” (p. 27).

In summary, if organizations are truly going to construct dialogic spaces for internal or external stakeholder groups, management must be willing to take risks, make an empathic commitment to partners while working toward a common future. This requires organizations to reflect on their existing organizational processes. Then, they must negotiate how much control they are willing to relinquish and how many resources will be applied in order to achieve true two-way, give-and-take communicative relationships with stakeholders that: 1) improve understanding among parties, 2) make decisions that benefit both parties, and 3) foster elements of a fully functioning society (Heath et al., 2006; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Relationships remain a central focus in public relations discourse. Researchers have given more attention to empirical measures of the features of relationships than modernizing our definition and understanding of them.

Until now, this literature review has focused on how public relations scholarship has moved from functional perspectives to more developed relational perspectives, that include dialogue and dialogic communication, to help the field advance and survive in a globally oriented world.

Chapter 3 shifts the focus to examine interdisciplinary approaches used over decades to develop an understanding of engagement within internal and external stakeholder group situations.

CHAPTER 3: ENGAGEMENT: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

Researchers from the fields of marketing, business management, organizational communication, public relations, and mass communication have attempted to define engagement. Many attempts have addressed *how* engagement might exist with certain conditions established. For example, how do people involve themselves emotionally and psychologically in their work or as a member of an organization? How do people involve themselves emotionally and psychologically with a product or brand? How do people interact with products and organizations in online spaces? Most of the literature focuses on internal and external stakeholders such as employees, activist groups, and consumers, and engaging them via specific channels such as social media.

This section of the literature review examines the varying conceptions of engagement imbedded within definitions of employee engagement, external stakeholder engagement, social media engagement, and dialogic engagement. What follows is a review of relevant literature that pulls from each of these areas in order to identify engagement's essential features.

Employee Engagement

Interest in employee engagement has grown in the last two decades, particularly among internal communication managers (Welch, 2011). In 2013, a study of U.S. chief corporate communicators found employee engagement to be an important strategic trend confronting organizations (Goodman, Genest, Bertoli, Templo, & Wolman, 2013). However, employee engagement has been defined in varied ways.

From an organizational communication perspective, employee engagement is often coupled with concepts that stimulate the cognitions and emotions of employees like organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior (Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004).

Organizational commitment describes an individual's attitude and attachment to the organization for which they work. Some researchers describe employee involvement as the "emotional or intellectual commitment to the organization," or "the amount of discretionary effort exhibited by employees in their jobs" (Saks, 2006, p. 601). Robinson and colleagues (2004) suggest there are at least two types of commitment employees can have. Affective commitment refers to satisfied and engaged employees who are willing to "go beyond the call of duty for the good of the organization" (p. 7). Structural commitment means the employee and employer relationship is viewed as a transactional exchange where employees provide labor in return for fair pay from the organization.

The other term, organizational citizenship behavior, refers to the voluntary and informal behaviors that involve employees doing good for the organization outside of their assigned work roles which includes sportsmanship, loyalty, initiative, and self-development (Robinson, et al., 2004; Saks, 2006). Researchers credit overall organizational successes and high customer satisfaction and loyalty ratings to an engaged workforce (Jose & Mampilly, 2014; Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Organizational behavior scholar, William A. Kahn (1990, 1992) developed some of the earliest theoretical constructions of employee engagement.

Kahn (1990) began by defining personal engagement as it related how an individual psychologically experiences their work life. By interviewing summer camp counselors and employees of an architecture firm, Kahn revealed how "people's experiences of themselves and their work contexts influenced moments of personal engagement and disengagement” (p. 702). He explored how employees engaged and disengaged themselves at work where personal engagement involves the “harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (p. 694). Conversely, personally disengaged employees withdraw physically, emotionally, or cognitively during work tasks. In other words, different conditions at work can cause varying degrees of attachment or detachment to the work at hand. Additionally, Kahn argued that three psychological conditions—*meaningfulness*, *safety*, and *availability*—shape how employees personally engage or disengage while at work. May, Gilson, & Harter (2004) tested these psychological conditions by surveying employees and managers of a midwestern insurance company about their perceptions of themselves, their coworkers, jobs, and supervisors. They found that meaningfulness, availability, and safety were positively related to engagement.

Psychological *meaningfulness* refers to “return on investment” for the employee. Employees who found their work challenging and personally meaningful were highly engaged (May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Saks, 2006). Psychological *safety*, on the other hand, describes employees who feel they can show or bring more of themselves into their work without fear of negative consequences to their self-image, status, or career. Employees found safety through rewards and recognition and from supportive supervisor relations. Finally, psychological *availability* is explained as the resources – physical, emotional, and psychological—that employees need in order to invest themselves in various roles required for work.

Kahn (1992) also argued engagement is at the heart of employees being “fully present” (Kahn, 1992, p. 322) in their work roles, which allows them to channel personal energies and become physically, cognitively, and emotionally involved in their work. Kahn, however, cautions that psychological presence is more than simple motivation but is instead authentication—bringing one's entire self, or increasing the depths of one's expressions of experienced feelings, thoughts, and beliefs into their organizations. The psychological conditions are important for understanding what leads employees to feel engaged. Kahn's research is framed primarily around factors that predict engagement but does not fully explain what engagement is nor offers ways to operationalize it.

Saks (2006) extended Kahn's (1990, 1992) theoretical framework of employee engagement. He found that employees who said they believe the organization values their contributions were more engaged, which Saks said is evident because they were more focused on their job and worked toward helping the organization reach its goals. Those whose jobs involved antecedents such as high levels of autonomy, skill variety, task significance, and receiving feedback from coworkers or supervisors were also more engaged in their jobs. Those employees who felt they could express themselves in their work were more likely to report they felt a greater connection to the organization. Finally, Saks found a consequence of an engaged employee was that they were more likely to have a more trusting and higher quality relationship with their employers.

On the other hand, Schaufeli, et al. (2002) examined dimensions that underlie engagement and burnout since the concepts are polar opposites. They define engagement as, "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind" (p. 295, see also Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Engagement is characterized by *vigor,* "high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties;" *dedication,* "being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge;" and *absorption,* "being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work" (pp. 74–75). Known predominantly within the human services field, burnout is explained as emotional exhaustion, or mental weariness as the result of a depletion of emotions due to demanding interpersonal contact with others (Schaufeli et al., 2002; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). As such, the opposite dimensions of engagement's vigor, dedication, and absorption are burnout's exhaustion, cynicism, and low levels of professional efficacy.

To illustrate how the personal and work-related engagement components mentioned above tie together, Welch (2011) constructed a model that takes an organization-level look at employee engagement and its value to internal corporate communication. Figure 3 provides a condensed version of Welch's model that highlights only the key features of Kahn's (1990, 1992) and Schaufeli, et al.'s, (2002; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) definitions of engagement. In particular, Welch's (2011) model connects Kahn's emotional, cognitive, and physical components of engagement with the positive opposites of employee burnout outlined by Schaufeli et al. (2002)—dedication, vigor, and absorption—each linking back to Kahn's requirements of psychological, or full, presence; meaningfulness, availability, and safety. Organizational commitment constructs—specifically, sense of commitment and belonging—(Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004) are included in the model as antecedents to employee engagement. While the model is only focused on employee engagement, it provides a basis for how scholars can gain a better understanding of a concept's complex nature. The model also serves as a potential framework for this dissertation's effort to illustrate an understanding of how public relations practitioners think and talk about the principles of engagement.

Figure 3. Employee engagement concept model

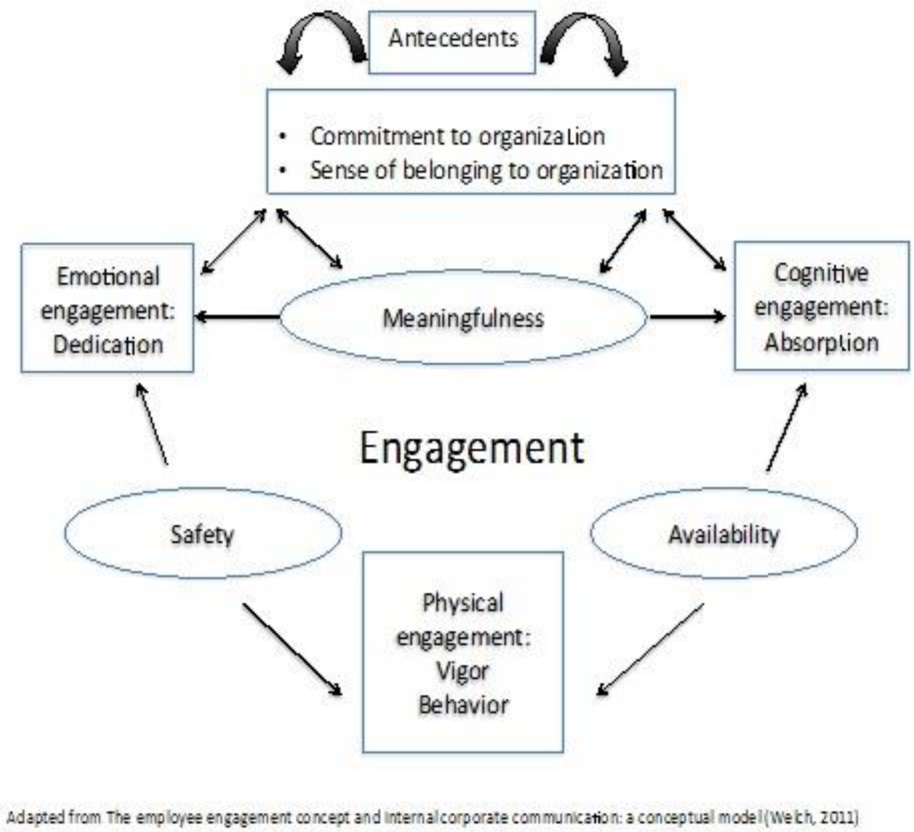

Figure 3. Employee engagement concept model. This figure illustrates the key features of employee engagement in internal corporate communications.

Another concept tied to employee engagement is organizational identification (Lau & May, 1998; Rice, Marlow, & Masarech, 2012; Trahant, 2009), which Mael and Ashforth (1992) describe as “the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization, where the individual defines him or herself in terms of the organization in which he or she is a member” (p. 104). Organizational psychologists explain organizational identification as an affective and cognitive bond between the organization and the employee that leads to positive work-related attitudes, such as job satisfaction and motivation (Karanika-Murray, Duncan, Pontes, & Griffiths, 2015;

Mael & Ashforth, 1992). The stronger, more positive bond employees have with their organization, the more engaged, dedicated, and satisfied they are in their work. Conversely, the less bonded employees feel, or the less they identify with their organization, the less engaged and connected they are with their work.

Referring back to Knapp's (1978) model of a relationship coming together, the final step is bonding from which engagement emerges. The stage is comparable to "getting engaged." Knapp likens engagement to being committed to a common future; engaged employees see a shared future with their workplace. The very act of bonding or engagement, according to Knapp, can change the nature of a relationship.

According to research by both Robinson et al. (2004) and Rice et al. (2012), the idea of win-win situations is also related to employee engagement. The approach emphasizes the give-and-take between organizations and employees. For example, the organization provides career growth and development opportunities, and provides work-life balance for employees in order to engage them, and the employee repays by doing more to help the organization become successful. Maximum contribution, according to Rice, et al., occurs when organizations are committed to employee satisfaction through compensation, career development, rewards and recognition, and meaningful work. Then, as employees achieve their career aspirations and fit work into the broader context of their lives, they attain maximum satisfaction. The authors conclude that engagement occurs when employees develop a sense of belonging and meaning to the organization's goals, and the organization, in turn, provides clearly defined work priorities and expectations.

Organizations that cultivate relationships with their workforce can lead to employees who are enthusiastic and committed to the success of the organization. Robinson, et al. (2004) offer "two-way" as another approach to consider engagement a win-win proposition for employees and organizations. Organizations must work to nurture, maintain, and grow positive experiences with employees through cultivating two-way relationships. In turn, employees choose to work with their colleagues in order to improve job performance in a way that benefits the organization.

In summary, definitions of employee engagement have overlapped with terms such as commitment, identification, involvement, and citizenship behavior. Many of the concepts are either precursors to or consequences of engagement (Robinson et al., 2004; Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010; Welch, 2011). The presence or absence of certain psychological characteristics such as absorption, vigor, and dedication, for example, can cause employees to become more or less engaged with their work and organization (Kahn, 1990, 1992; Saks, 2006, Schaufeli et al., 2002, Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Additionally, how an organization's goals align with employees' values can lead to how well employees bond with the organization, how satisfied they will be in their jobs, and as a result, how engaged they become. Engagement in this context is an ongoing process that consists of two states of mind—affect and cognition. The level of emotional and cognitive engagement influences the level of commitment and sense of belonging employees have with organizations, which in turn leads to a sense of job satisfaction and investment in the organization.

The above discussion emphasizes the difficulty that exists in conceptualizing employee engagement. What has been revealed are the many layers that materialize when examining engagement from internal stakeholder perspectives. As the next section will demonstrate, similar issues emerge when exploring engagement from external perspectives.

External Stakeholder Engagement

While employees are considered a primary stakeholder group of any organization, and stockholders are generally considered the most important stakeholder group (Alexander & Miesing, 2004; Greenwood, 2007), the discussion of engagement in this section of the literature review expands beyond employees and stockholders to include external groups such as governments, media, suppliers, consumers, social and environmental activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and communities (Andriof et al., 2002). Theoretic perspectives of stakeholder engagement draw from the business ethics, social accounting, and human resource management traditions including accountability (Gray, 2002); decision-making and governance (Van Buren, 2001); risk management (Deegan, 2002); and control (Owen, Swift, Humphrey & Bowerman, 2000). Additionally, the corporate social responsibility literature addresses building trust with external stakeholders to meet moral obligations (Greenwood, 2007); however, corporate social responsibility is not the focus of the discussion about external stakeholder engagement. Unlike employee engagement, the focus of external stakeholder engagement is less on isolating and defining constructs of engagement, but rather, on how stakeholder engagement morphed into existence and its broader impact on organizations.

Current conceptual frameworks of stakeholder engagement also referred to as stakeholder relations and stakeholder relationships provide a way for external groups' concerns to be acknowledged and their expectations met (Devin & Lane, 2014) through meaningful relationships established with organizations (Golob & Podnar, 2014; Wang & Chaudhri, 2009). Engagement then becomes a two-way participatory act that involves stakeholders in the organization's business activities and decision-making. Engagement also becomes a communal effort to build trust between parties more so than an organizational effort to manage stakeholder expectations in an attempt to meet its long-term business goals.

In their study of small-to-medium-sized companies in New Zealand, Bruce and Shelley (2010) found that these organizations had more dialogue with a broad range of stakeholders than did their corporate counterparts. In fact, stakeholder communication and stakeholder engagement, while closely related, emerged from interviews with company leaders as two important themes. Stakeholder communication refers to effective dialogue between organizations and stakeholders that contribute to the success of the organization. This two-way symmetrical approach highlights the organization's willingness to not only listen to feedback, but also respond to customer concerns. Similarly, stakeholder engagement is "a process [that enables] voices to be heard without one voice dominating dialogue" (p. 33). Communicators felt that by engaging in dialogue with both internal and external stakeholders, their ability to listen and respond to their customers was enhanced. In turn, dialogue used tactically as part of the engagement process informed businesses' practice and enhanced market performance. The effort to be "socially responsible" through engagement also represents a two-way symmetrical exchange between organizations and their stakeholders.

Practicing stakeholder engagement.

At its core, stakeholder engagement is about relationships; therefore, strategies include the building of ongoing partnerships and/or alliances between organizations and broader groups of stakeholders than shareholders (Lawrence, 2002). These relationships in turn describe an organization's behavior within its community that are, "trust-based collaborations between individuals and/or social institutions with different objectives that can only be achieved together" (Andriof, et al., 2002, p. 42).

Hence, successful collaborative partnerships between parties occur when agreed-upon norms, rules, and cooperative interactions are used to determine the issues of interest to discuss. These attempts at collaborations are particularly noticeable when examining the tensions between organizations and activists (Smith & Ferguson, 2001). Activists, as an active stakeholder group, typically seek to change organizations in some manner (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Organizations realize that these groups have gained more power with the development of computer-mediated technologies, social and environmental performance and stakeholder perception of corporate responsibility (Alexander, et al., 2004; Andriof et al., 2002).

Lawrence (2002) investigated the impact of stakeholder engagement by examining mid-1990s initiatives of the multinational oil company Royal Dutch/Shell with activist stakeholders. The corporation needed to improve its social and environmental performance and improve the public's perception of the organization's corporate citizenship in the face of sharp public scrutiny after two events that led to separate consumer boycotts. First, Shell looked for ways to dispose of an aging oil storage buoy in the North Sea. They made plans to sink it in the Atlantic; however, environmentalists from Greenpeace were concerned about how toxic residue would harm marine life. As a result, members of Greenpeace occupied the buoy for three weeks. Negative publicity and public opinion forced Shell to change its plans. In the second circumstance, and just a few months after the buoy incident, a Nigerian human rights activist leader and eight of his colleagues were executed. The leader had been critical of Shell's preservation practices of the Niger River delta and its lack of revenue-sharing practices with citizens in the oil-producing regions where they did business. Environmentalists and human rights activists as well as community organizers waged negative campaigns against Shell for not intervening with authorities to stop the execution. In both instances, Shell needed to rebuild its reputation and repair relations among various stakeholders. Additionally, the organization needed to somehow acknowledge that it understood society's expectations of them.

Engaging in open, interactive dialogue with the NGOs was a risk. Using a dialogic strategy threatened public failure, loss of control, and setting expectations that extend beyond what the company may be able to produce. Nonetheless, Shell developed a series of stakeholder engagement initiatives that included discussions with human rights activists with Catholic-based NGO, Pax Christi International, and well-known human rights NGO, Amnesty International. Over a three-year period, Shell met with members of the two NGOs in face-to-face meetings and public forums. The organization responded to the groups' recommendations by revising their existing human rights policies in which they pledged support to speak out on "matters affecting the company or its stakeholders" (p. 193). Dialogic partners like Shell and its stakeholders must be motivated, have goals, and have the resources to engage. Shell was motivated because these two substantial crises threatened its reputation and societal standing. As a result, Shell invested resources needed to work directly with the activist groups to set goals that would help them reach common ground.

Thus far, employee and stakeholder engagement have frequently been described as processes that produce certain behavioral outcomes or orientations that organizations take with internal and external stakeholders. Recent developments have described engagement as a communicative process that emphasizes dialogue between the organization and its stakeholders (Bruce & Shelley, 2010; Golob & Podnar, 2014; Perret, 2003) to create "a network of mutual responsibility through relationships" (Devin & Lane, 2014, p. 438). Despite organizations' reticence to relinquish power (Perret, 2003), dialogic approaches underscore the need to enter into collaborative and cooperative interactions whereby both sets of interests are protected. What has emerged from the literature is stakeholder dialogue, which indicates "parties with different interests and values at stake . . . work[ing] together toward mutually acceptable solutions" (p. 385).

Stakeholder dialogue highlights the levels of engagement necessary for complex stakeholder relationships. Perret (2003) demonstrates what engagement with distributive power looks like. His typology identifies five dialogic approaches, from the least to the most interactive, for organizations. The first four reflect asymmetrical goals: 1) *information-giving* ensures that stakeholders are informed even though they have neither influence nor a part in the decision-making process; 2) *information gathering* informs a decision and, while stakeholders may provide input, they have no control over how that information is used; 3) *consultation* calls for the organization to understand the thoughts and feelings of stakeholders on proposals already prepared by the organization; and 4) *bounded dialogue* provides collaboration on the development of initiatives or policies; however, the organization has control of the parameters of the dialogue. The fifth typology reflects symmetrical communication; the goal of *open dialogue* is to develop a decision that meets the needs of stakeholders who have set the parameters together with the organization.

Dialogic Engagement

Perret's (2003) typology for stakeholder dialogue resembles Taylor and Kent's (2014) effort to advance their argument in favor of dialogic engagement in public relations. The scholars suggest a better explanation of why a dialogic approach to communication can be an effective strategy for practitioners to build and maintain organization—public relationships. Merging elements of engagement and dialogue transforms engagement from a non-action-oriented term into an action-oriented one that implies “participative interaction,” while still ensuring ethical communication between dialogic participants that does not merely rely on transmitting and receiving communication. In other words, dialogic communicators must successfully and ethically manage the needs of multiple stakeholder groups through acceptance, inclusivity, and positivity toward each other and the communication process (Lane & Kent, in press).

Taylor and Kent (2014) suggest that participants must be willing to give their whole selves to encounters, be accessible, respect the other, and abandon the desire to maintain a neutral position and risk attachment. Being fully engaged means organizations should have broader contexts and wider perspectives to guide their decisions. Engagement, then, is connected to the variety, amount, breadth, and depth of communication that occurs between parties.

In summary, this chapter revealed engagement to a multifaceted, complex term that scholars across disciplines have attempted to define. The review of the literature emphasizes the difficulty that exists in its conceptualization. What has been revealed, however, are the many layers that materialize when examining engagement from internal and external stakeholder perspectives.

Chapter 4 explores contemporary considerations of technological advancements in communication and the influence they have had on organizations and communication professionals. Specifically, it is worth exploring scholarship that underscores concepts such as social media engagement and interactivity, both of which have garnered increased attention from scholars in the last decade. Doing so helps to situate engagement as more than a psychological construct.

CHAPTER 4: PUBLIC RELATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

The Internet and the new capabilities of social media continually stimulate new ways of thinking about their impact on the public relations profession and research. Advanced computer-mediated technologies have stopped organizations from remaining at the center or in control of relationships with their internal and external stakeholders. Operating in a more globally oriented society, organizations are now required to consider more collaboration and inclusion from multiple stakeholder groups. Communication processes once crucial to the success of an organization's mission and business operations have evolved from one-way communication models, to dialogic, or two-way communication models. As a result, stakeholders, or users, now have become the center of focus in an organization—public relationship.

Thus far, attempts have been made in this dissertation's literature review to paint, with broad strokes, a picture of the importance organization—public relationships have had in the development of the public relations field. This chapter examines current conversations surrounding a technologically advanced environment and its influence on organizations and communication professionals. The chapter also highlights the interactive nature of digital technologies by exploring the differences between interactivity and social media engagement, two areas that have received increasing attention from communication scholars. Exploring interaction in a digital world is important for the purpose of this dissertation as I situate engagement as something psychologically deeper, yet conceptually more abstract than the follows, fans, clicks, or likes received from interaction with digital content; the state of engagement rather than the act of engagement.

Changing Communication Environment

The development and subsequent rapid growth of the internet and the diffusion of social media have transformed communication between organizations and their publics through interactivity that is dynamic, socially networked, and user-generated (Kelleher, 2007; Smith, 2013). The evolution of digital technology has progressed from one-to-one and one-to-many to its current many-to-many capabilities. Such enhanced connectivity has shifted power relations away from practitioners who disseminated organization information to networked publics who now have the autonomy to decide with whom they will interact, what they interact about, and what occurs within digital social spaces (Motion, Heath, & Leitch, 2016; Smith, 2010). Publics are more proactive about gathering information, defining and communicating about issues, and publics value collaborative website content creation (Guillory & Sundar, 2008; Park & Reber, 2008; Smith, 2013). In some instances, publics have garnered the power to affect an organization's reputation. For example, in the summer of 2012, the Chick-fil-A organization came under fire for comments its president, Dan Cathy, made about same-sex marriage (Giovinco, 2014; Horovitz, 2014). Within days news about Cathy's comments spread throughout social media and the public responded both offline and online. The Los Angeles Times' blog, Money & Co., had its post about the president's comments shared more than 3,800 times on Facebook (Lynch, 2012; O'Connor, 2014). This shift in communicative power online has forced communicators to reimagine how to build and manage relationships in ways that are meaningful to the organization and its stakeholders (Motion et al., 2016; Waddington, 2015). Argenti and Barnes (2009) claimed new media would be a game changer for public relations and strategic communication.

Digital Revolution—Practitioner and Organizational Perspectives

The initial popularity of social media was supposed to create new pathways for the field of public relations and practitioners. The skills necessary for understanding new media altered the communicator's job function, which became essential to conduct various public relations activities including research and evaluation, two-way communication, and issues management (Sallot, Porter, & Acosta-Alzuru, 2004). For practitioners who typically fulfilled the organizational roles of public relations manager or technician (Broom, 1982; Johnson, 1997), incorporating social media into practice was an important indicator of professional growth. For example, Anderson and Reagan (1992) noted when new technologies were used for decision-making, practitioners were granted membership into the organization's dominant coalition, or senior management, which, in turn, meant practitioners had greater access, status, and power within organizations. Expanded roles positioned them as advisers to departments across organizations. At that time, digital technologies, specifically social media, represented a paradigmatic shift in corporate communication strategy (Wright, 2001). While social media activity among practitioners has increased over the last decade particularly for communication with external stakeholders (Wright & Hinson, 2008, 2009, 2013, 2015), Taylor and Kent (2014) caution there is little evidence to suggest social media are effective tools for engagement. Alas, the promise of skilled strategists and innovators taking prominent positions within their organizations never materialized, but instead, they have been preserved as blog masters and "Tweeters in Chief" (Kent & Saffer, 2014).

However, the adoption of the wide range of social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat) into public relations practice has, in some ways, made the communicator's job easier by affording them opportunities to reach, persuade, and inform larger numbers and more-diverse stakeholders with an organizational message (Duhé, 2015; Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). In other words, practitioners with direct access to stakeholders now have greater opportunities to partner with them (Smith, 2013). Social media have become tools to gain insight into stakeholder groups' concerns, needs, and preferences as well as attitudes about the organization's reputation and campaign efforts. For example, Saxton and Waters (2014) examined the Facebook behaviors (i.e., number of likes, comments, and shares) of nonprofit organization stakeholders and found that the public prefers opportunities for dialogue to one-way information messages in an organization's status updates.

The preplanned, "tell style" of communication where organizations broadcast or tell stakeholders what they want them to know, traditionally delivered by mass media, has become an outdated approach (Argenti, 2006; Fawkes & Gregory, 2000, Munter, 2006). As a result of having the ability to search and track the conversation of stakeholders and other important influencers (Smith, 2010), and social media being central to the culture of increased connectivity, stakeholder expectations of organizations have increased. For instance, stakeholder groups have an easier way to express their views and opinions about brands with the expectation that organizations will be more transparent with information and make that information more easily accessible (Waddington, 2015). Stakeholders also presume to pose questions directly to organizations with the expectation that responses will come from a trustworthy voice from within the organization. Anticipating these needs, organizations must move toward what Fawkes and Gregory (2000) refer to as, “participative communication,” a two-way process that focuses on creating meaning and mutual understanding.

Further, public relations scholars caution that traditional public relations communication models do not translate in digital spaces forcing communicators to instead “consider news levels of risk [and] relationship” (Smith, 2010, p. 334). In other words, as the public relations field shifts to co-creational approaches of communication, understanding where public relations fits into these online social relationships can present an opportunity for dialogic theory and dialogic engagement (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002). Co-creational approaches can also emphasize the important role of communication as both parties work together to create shared meaning (Avidar, 2013; Heath, 2006). Put another way, the digital age offers a space where organizations and stakeholders can collaboratively negotiate the terms of entering into and maintaining successful relationships.

Establishing online relationships also means organizations must find new ways to engage stakeholders. Smith (2010) calls for considerations for new levels of interactivity, a recurring theme in computer-mediated communication and social media scholarship frequently switched with engagement (Duhé, 2012). For example, social media engagement has become the catchall metric phrase practitioners use to capture the number of online organizational message shares, posted likes and comments, and the accumulation of microblog followers (DiStaso & Bortree, 2014; Kang, 2014; Men & Tsai, 2014; Smith & Gallicano, 2015; Yang & Kang, 2009). As a result, Valentini (2015) suggests social media measurement has yet to realize “the added value contributed by social media to securing organization’s objectives” (p. 173).

Social Media Engagement

One area of growing interest among industry leaders and scholars is to gain a better understanding of social media technologies from the user's perspective (Hopp & Gallicano, 2016). Hence, researchers suggest that social media engagement is the new paradigm for public relations in the 21st century (Johnston, 2014). Hopp and Gallicano (2016) note current conceptualizations of engagement in public relations literature are too narrow for social media because measures typically do not originate from social media research but integrates engagement with the quality of organization—public relationships. In itself, Taylor and Kent (2014) maintain that engagement is a "two-way, relational, give-and-take between organizations and stakeholders/publics with the intended goal of (a) improving understanding among those who interact; (b) making decisions that benefit all parties involved, not simply the organization; and (c) fostering a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006), where decisions are made based on informed participative interactions that involve stakeholders" (p. 391).

Social media engagement, defined from the user's perspective, can refer to the attachment people feel to one another and organizations through interactivity, connectedness, positive attitudes, and word of mouth intentions (Johnson, Bazaa, & Chen, 2011; Yang & Kang, 2009). Oh, Bellur, and Sundar (2010) argue that it is the immersive experience with social media content that leads people to various forms of participation. Industry leaders have also tried to construct a definition and develop measurement standards for both engagement and social media engagement. For example, Trowbridge (2013) said engagement is the number of social media connections and the length of time a person follows an organization.

In 2013, the Social Media Standards Conclave, a network of public relations, social media, and business professionals and agencies, crafted criteria for engagement. They defined engagement as an interaction between two or more parties that extends beyond exposure. They maintained social media engagement is action that occurs in response to the content on an owned channel. The Conclave measures engagement by counting interactions, including comments, retweets, shares, and likes (Paine, Stevens, & Jeffrey, 2013).

Empirical findings vary from blog engagement (Hopp & Gallicano, 2016; Yang & Kang, 2009) and customer engagement (Sashi, 2012) to organization—public engagement (Men & Tsai, 2014). Paine (2011) maintains engagement, as part of online measurement, is the first step in an organization's effort to build a relationship with stakeholders. She states that engagement is a person acting beyond viewing or reading content (e.g., downloading, commenting, retweeting). Action on the part of the user equates to interest in the organization, brand, or product.

Many other explanations offered in literature equate engagement with varying degrees of interactivity. Wigley and Lewis (2012) compared the tweets of highly engaged companies with less-engaged companies and found highly engaged companies received less negative mentions in tweets and were more likely to maintain two-way interaction with stakeholders. Whereas less-engaged organizations received more mentions in tweets because stakeholders chose to fill the information void left by the organization. Wigley and Lewis (2012) conclude what an organization uses to interact with stakeholders is as important as how they interact with them. Cho, Schweickart, and Haase (2014) examined whether organizational message strategies (i.e., press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetry, two-way symmetry) influence the level of public engagement on Facebook, which was measured according to likes, shares, and comments (considered the highest level of engagement). The study suggests two-way symmetrical communication remains most useful for organizations to build and maintain relationships and the best way to encourage stakeholders to engage with an organization online.

Interactivity versus engagement.

As relationships between organizations and stakeholder groups grow more complex due to global influences, the social affordances offered by the internet to both parties such as information-gathering and dissemination have become more nuanced. The interactive nature of the internet continues to be a growing area of research interest, and emerging definitions of interactivity closely overlap with engagement, which can create confusion To illustrate, Figure 4 represents characteristics used throughout scholarship to explain engagement, and interactive is among those characteristics.

Figure 4. Engagement attribution wheel (Boulianne, 2009; Greenwood, 2007; Men & Tsai, 2014; Saks, 2006; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Yang & Kang, 2009)

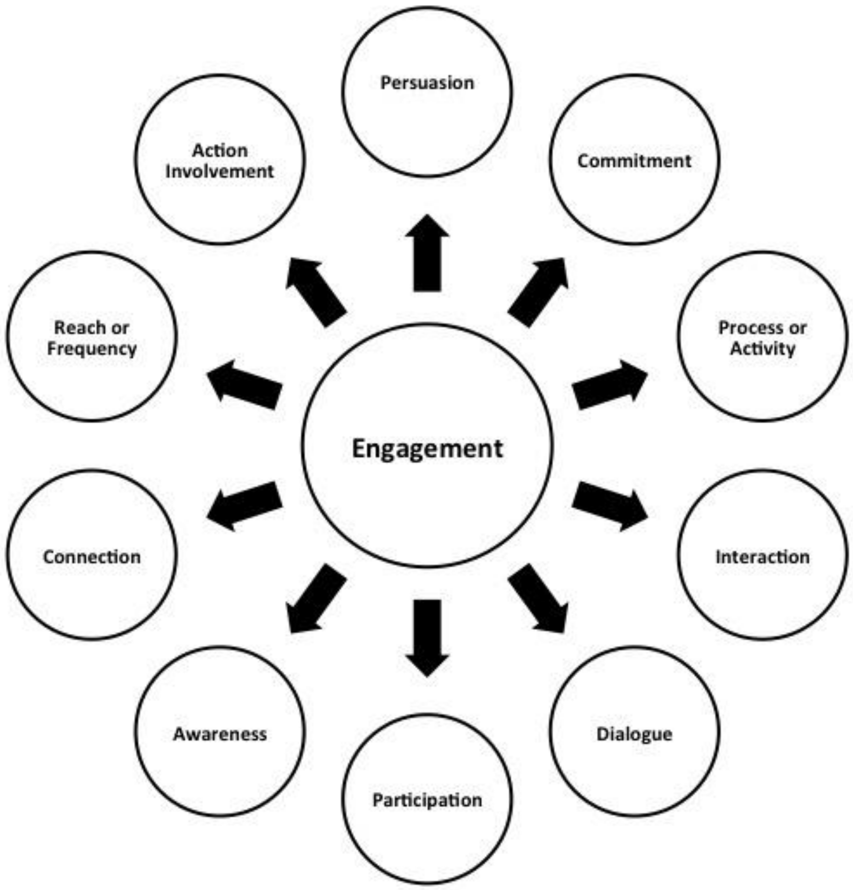

Figure 4. Engagement attribution wheel. This figure illustrates characteristics of engagement across disciplines.

Conceptually, interactivity and engagement are complex terms independent of the other. In the context of social media engagement, however, a brief examination of the various distinctions of interactivity is warranted.

Steuer (1992) defined interactivity as “the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of the mediated environment in real time” (p. 84). Other perspectives of interactivity address technological features (Downes & McMillan, 2000; Steuer, 1992), communication settings (Rafaeli, 1988), and user perceptions (Downes & McMillan, 2000; Wu, 1999).

Kiousis's (2002) definition of interactivity focuses on three dimensions: technological properties, communication context, and user perception. Media and psychological dimensions vary depending on the technology (i.e., phone to computer system), and a person's "ability to perceive the [mediated] experience as a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence" (p. 372). Put another way, interactivity consists of the individual user's communication experience with two-way and multi-way messages transmitted through mediated technologies (i.e., telephone to virtual reality) and how "real" they perceive the mediated environment. Kiousis (2002) associates the timing flexibility of communication technologies to whether the computer system allows users to communicate in real time or if responses are or can be delayed (e.g., online chats versus email). Further, Kiousis makes the clear distinction between mediated and unmediated communication experiences by emphasizing the differences rest between human interaction and media interaction. Media interaction typically involves technologically mediated experiences, whereas human interaction can occur in person and without technology.

In their web-based analysis of the levels of website interactivity, interest in politics, and voter impressions of political candidates, Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown (2003) explicated interactivity by categorizing definitions into two views—*functional* and *contingency*. Functional views of interactivity typically refer to the capacity of a website, or a website's interface, to allow the exchange of information between the technology and users through email links, feedback forms, and chat rooms. The greater the number of functions on a website, the greater the interactivity of the website. However, Sundar et al. claim academic scholarship has predominately emphasized the channels (i.e., functionality, technical aspects), which rarely specify any real outcomes of interactive communication. On the other hand, contingency perspectives assess the psychological effects of interactivity based on message exchange. Consistent with this perspective, full interactivity occurs when the communicative process depends on the interchangeability of users, media, and messages, and how those messages relate to one another (Rafaeli, 1988; Sundar, et al., 2003). Williams, Rice, and Rogers' (1988) definition of interactivity also reflects the contingency perspective: "the degree to which participants in a communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in, their mutual discourse" (p. 10). Put another way, the contingency perspective highlights the interconnected relationships that exist among messages exchanged online (Kiousis, 2002).

Interactivity is also a key concept examined in organizational online relationship building (Avidar, 2013) between the message sender (organization), and the receiver (stakeholder), which may include Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles. Organizations have designed their websites with Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles in mind (e.g., dialogic loop, useful information, return visits, intuitiveness, conservation of visitors). Wu (1999) suggests stakeholder perceptions of interactivity could impact their attitude towards websites. Jo and Kim (2003) found the interactive nature of the web enhances the relationship and collaboration between organizations and stakeholders. Guillory and Sundar (2008) found the greater the perception of interactivity of an organization's website, the more favorably stakeholders thought of the organization. When an organization is perceived through its website as more responsive, provides more options, and allows real-time feedback, stakeholders believe the organization's investment in the relationship is high (Yoon, Choi, & Sohn, 2008).

Although communication can occur with little or no interaction, Rafaeli (1988) suggests interactivity requires individuals in communication to respond to each other, whether through unmediated, face-to-face, intimate and relatively anonymous, and mass–mediated approaches. With more attention placed on new media, definitions generally describe interactivity in terms of unique, interactive functions, and features of the technology hardware, as well as the emotional connectedness users feel when using a piece of technology (Sundar et al., 2003). In the end interactivity is participatory in nature with cognitive and emotional components, which can occur in response to something that transpires in mediated or non-mediated spaces. In contrast, the cognitive and psychological features of engagement can precede or follow with behavioral reaction.

Literature regarding organization—public relationships, dialogic communication, and employee, stakeholder and social media engagement provide foundations for this dissertation. Chapter 5 describes the study's research questions and details the method used to answer those questions.

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

The previous literature review provided the context of how public relations has evolved from one-way organization-centric communication to considerations of two-way communication that assists in building effective stakeholder relationships in a civil society. This section specifies the methodological explanation for this theory-building research. Namely, engagement has emerged in public relations as a normative practice that can contribute toward that effectiveness by focusing on how stakeholders and organizations contribute toward their mutual successes. However, with multiple explications coming from diverse fields, definitions vary greatly, which makes it particularly difficult to describe engagement and how it is employed and evaluated among practitioners.

A number of studies have constructed scales to measure engagement quantitatively (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992; Tsai & Men, 2013; Yang & Kang, 2009). This study takes a step back in order to incorporate the perspectives of those professionals whose jobs involve engaging with their organizations' stakeholders. Three research questions were generated to guide this study:

RQ1: What are the varied perspectives and meanings practitioners hold to describe and understand the features of engagement?

This question helps ascertain normative descriptions and understandings of the term that resonate most with practitioners faced with applying the term in their daily work. Few aspects of public relations literature consider engagement from the practitioner's perspective.

RQ2: How do practitioners manage engagement efforts among internal and external stakeholders?

This question focuses on how public relations practitioners apply the engagement principles through long-term strategic and day-to-day tactical efforts. Additionally, the question addresses the techniques professionals believe are most or least useful to contribute and meet the organizational objectives while also considering the needs of stakeholders.

RQ3: How do practitioners gauge whether successful engagement efforts meet the needs of the organization's goals and mission?

Public relations practitioners are expected to inform the organization's leadership about their effectiveness in building, growing and/or maintaining stakeholder relationships. These results can help practitioners determine which evaluative measures to use that further underscore the value and influence of two-way communication. Additionally, the insight will help scholars to better understand the real-world implications of engagement, which may help develop informed procedures within practice for the most effective ways to engage.

The qualitative process of asking open-ended interview questions was determined to be the best approach to learn from practitioners' experiences and understand the descriptive meanings they ascribe to "engagement" (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; L. Grunig, 2008). Specifically, in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners across industry were employed. The next section provides an explanation of the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative research, a brief context of the dissertation and a description of the data collection and theory-building analysis process used.

Method

Qualitative research is valuable in answering "how" and "why" questions by studying ordinary events in local environments. Examining everyday routines, activities, and interactions allow social, cultural, economic, or political phenomena to be studied within a real-world context (Daymon & Holloway, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). The qualitative approach also provides an in-depth way to uncover the varied perspectives of individuals who perform the activity studied. Qualitative inquiries allow researchers to distinguish the nuances that emerge based on these human experiences. As it relates to this dissertation, qualitative research provided a way to discover the views and experiences of public relations practitioners to understand engagement in their own voice by identifying their procedures, processes, and how these professionals think about the term.

Qualitative researchers become the instrument and are actively and collaboratively engaged in the sense-making process while generating and building knowledge within the discipline by study participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). For public relations scholars, partnering with practitioners can help scholars better understand the phenomenon being studied from the perspectives of members of their public or, as with this study, from a practitioner point of view (Daymon & Holloway, 2010).

Because words collected and analyzed are based on observations, interviews, or the careful review of documents, they cannot be considered objective. Rather, the investigator interprets findings based on her/his experience, personal values, attitudes, and beliefs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Davies and Dodd (2002) argue that the rigor found in qualitative research is not limited to structured, measurable, or uniform methods. Instead, methods that encourage flexibility, contradictions, and incompleteness, like those found in qualitative research methods, do not lack credibility. However, in an effort to uphold rigor, credibility and validity, qualitative researchers must outline in detail the procedures they follow in their research to select participants and collect and analyze data (Davies & Dodd, 2002).

A tenet of qualitative research is to provide rich descriptions of what occurs in context of the study participants lives. While the number of participants in the study will, by nature, be significantly fewer than for a quantitative approach such as a survey, qualitative researchers hope to discover the views and meanings held by study participants in order to understand the world from their perspectives. Thus, gaining an in-depth, holistic understanding will often come from a smaller number of members of that community (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Of course, qualitative findings do not represent the larger population and the researcher must be careful to avoid reporting results as if they can be generalized.

Extending discussions of engagement by exploring co-construction of meaning provides new considerations of engagement's value in relationship building among internal and external stakeholders. Therefore, examining the processes and the ways in which public relations practitioners describe engagement is essential. To date, engagement studies have primarily involved quantitative data. Qualitatively, the voice of the practitioner has yet to be considered in these discussions. As such, conducting in-depth interviews with public relations practitioners who can address "how" and "why" engagement questions may lead to richer and more thorough understandings of engagement from a practitioner perspective. By probing in detail into the day-to-day practices of practitioners, there is the potential to create a roadmap of their descriptions of engagement that will contribute to the current body of public relations literature.

Participants

Study participants were public relations practitioners who serve in either the managerial role to develop communication strategies for their organizations or the technician role to execute communication strategies. The study did not set boundaries around the organization size or geographic location. Taking a qualitative approach was instrumental in revealing how an organization's size or location may influence issues of relationship building and maintenance with its publics. Additionally, no parameters were set to limit the industry sectors represented in the study. Gaining an understanding of how practitioners across industries discuss characteristics of the same phenomenon not only increased understanding of their use of engagement, but also showed the connections and divisions among study participants in order to have a sense of which cases are "typical" versus "atypical" (Rapley, 2013).

In order to obtain a large enough sample, I recruited study participants from personal contacts who work in agencies, businesses, universities, local government and healthcare. Snowball sampling, or a system of referrals and recommendations to identify professionals with similar experiences, was then employed (Jugenheimer, Kelley, Hudson, & Bradley, 2015). Using this method increased the likelihood of finding practitioners across industries. Public relations practitioners are a busy group of professionals that may not have time to participate in interviews; however, being referred by someone familiar to them may increase the chances of the practitioner agreeing to participate in the research. As such, I asked each participant for suggestions of other communication professionals to be interview for the research (see Appendix A).

Interviews in qualitative research are concerned with depth rather than breadth, quality over quantity (Luker, 2008; McCracken, 1988). The final number of practitioners interviewed for the study was 20. Ultimately, the goal was to reach a point of saturation in which no new perspectives were uncovered (Rapley, 2013). Once the University of North Carolina's Internal Review Board (IRB) approved the design of the study, interviews began. A copy of the protocol is located in Appendix A.

In-depth Interviews

The goal of conducting in-depth interviews is to gather the stories told by practitioners of how they describe engagement, employ engagement efforts and resulting experiences, and the assumptions professionals hold about the term as they build relationships with their publics. In qualitative research, the collection of practitioner stories and perspectives could come from journal and diary entries, internal documents, or Internet postings. In this study, interviews were the main source of data collection. As Luker (2008) explains, interviews are conversations between the researcher and the respondent. McCracken (1988) describes the long interview as a way to allow researchers to step into the minds of others "to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (p. 9). In other words, respondents are provided an opportunity to discuss the phenomenon under investigation (McCracken, 1988). Marshall and Rossman (1989) refer to a particular type of respondents as elites. These are experts who are considered influential, prominent, or the well informed in an organization or community. Public relations practitioners represent the communication experts for their organizations and as such, interviewing organizational elites had the advantage of capturing the overall views of the company, its policies, and histories.

Public relations practitioners were contacted via email to request an interview for this research. Interviews were conducted during the last two weeks of December 2016 and the first week of January 2017. Participants were asked to sign a consent form and an interviewee profile prior to being interviewed. The interview profile captured basic personal and professional demographic information (see Appendix A). This information was useful in the analysis process such as providing insight as to whether descriptions of engagement were more prevalent among senior executives versus mid-level managers.

While no geographic restrictions were placed on study participants, weather, time, and budget prevented in-person interviews with each practitioner. Nonetheless, in-person interviews occurred with participants who were within close proximity to the researcher, and were able to make the time for an in-person interview. Those respondents who were not within close proximity, and/or did not have time for an in-person interview were interviewed by telephone or via Skype. Because practitioners are often busy and can be called away at a moment's notice, more than half of the interviews were conducted by telephone. Each in-person, Skype, and telephone interview was audio and/or video recorded. Because participation was voluntary, study participants were permitted to decline to answer a question, request a recording pause or stop, and end the interview at any time. None did. Compensation for participation was not offered.

The university's IRB guidelines and regulations covered the physical, mental, and emotional protection of study participants; however, other ethical issues had to be considered. For example, while this dissertation topic is not of a sensitive nature, confidentiality of each interviewee was offered prior to the interview. Although Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) maintain confidentiality is difficult and at times impossible to guarantee, study participants were asked whether they wanted their names to be anonymous. Five of the 20 practitioners interviewed for this research asked for their names to be confidential. That said, because there were practitioners employed by smaller organizations with few staff members, which might make anonymity difficult, particularly when quotes are attributed to them, I only used first names of some participants and assigned pseudonyms to others. Further, while each professional included the name of their organization on the interviewee profile, I only listed the industry sector in the research's findings. For example, "Cynthia works for a local government agency." While there was little immediate tangible benefit for practitioners to participate in this research, each expressed interest in receiving a summary of the findings.

A semi-structured interview guide was instrumental in serving as a roadmap through conversations with practitioners. They were led through a set of questions that allowed them to speak honestly and openly about their experiences as practitioners (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Interview questions began with an overview and rapport-building questions, which were followed by questions about personal definitions of engagement, its synonyms, how it relates to interaction and relationships, what engagement with stakeholder groups looks like, and channels and methods used to engage them. The interview guide was divided into three main sections that directly addressed the dissertation's research questions (see Appendix B). While the questions served as a guide, there were moments when questions were asked and/or answered by participants out of sequential order. This permitted opportunities to explore a participant's response more deeply and provided the space for a respondent to provide unstructured responses.

Questions included prompts, or probes, that helped draw out comments for clarification and addressed aspects that participants overlooked (McCracken, 1988; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The prompts were placed at the end of each section of questions in the interview guide (McCracken, 1988). For example:

- What does engaging your stakeholder groups look like? Explain.
    Prompts:
    - How does this differ based on the stakeholder group? Explain.
    - Describe the channel(s)/method(s) used to engage you groups.

Having developed the interview guides based on prior scholarly assumptions identified from the literature, I was able to pair down and isolate areas that I wanted to explore further during the interview, which in turn helped to organize the data. Questions were added to the guide once interviews began, particularly as new insights developed during interviews.

Data organization and management.

A trained transcriptionist and transcription service were hired to provide verbatim records of interviews, which occurred over a 5-week period. The use of a transcriptionist saved considerable time. Audio time stamps were included at the start of each question and response on transcripts. The use of audio time stamps allowed me to quickly (re)locate participant quotes for further review and analysis. Additionally, a master file called, "interviewee details" was created, securely stored and backed up on a portable external hard drive that required a passcode that only I knew. Individual folders were created with the first letter of the interviewees' first name and their last name; folders also included the raw audio interview file, the interviewee profile, and the informed consent form. This was an approved IRB protocol.

Qualitative analysis is both iterative and cyclical and occurs throughout the research process. There are many decisions that inform procedures for selecting participants, data collection and organization, and verification of conclusions. The study followed the modified grounded theory approach as discussed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). In this instance, there were less-specified steps required during the research process that helped develop models that guided interpretation.

Coding and Analysis

Coding, a vital part of the qualitative analysis process, began as soon as data was collected and continued throughout collection and analysis. A code, according to Miles, Huberman & Saldaña (2014), is a descriptive or complex label the researcher assigns to chunks of data. Saldaña (2009) defines a code as, “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” (p. 3) to text or visual data. Charmaz (2001) describes codes as, “a researcher-generated construct that symbolizes . . . and attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization, theory building, and other analytic processes,” (pp. 3–4). Charmaz (2001) goes on to describe coding as the link between data collection and their explanation of meaning. In other words, coding helps to condense transcribed words by chunking segments of data with descriptive words or categories (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Two cycles of inductive coding allowed me to cluster data according to the research questions. Saldaña (2009) identifies two coding stages–first coding cycle and second coding cycle.

Additionally, the construction of a conceptual web of codes, or an operative coding scheme, is crucial to the process (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). The coding scheme is not a catalog of disjointed descriptors rather includes “larger meanings and their constitutive characteristics” (p. 84). This is the point where CAQDAS and its ability to display coding schemes proved invaluable during the analysis.

Computer software programs for data coding and analysis.

While components of qualitative research, discussed below, such as coding, memo writing, and identifying interrelationships are traditionally completed by hand, I used a computer software program called MAXQDA. The program helped to facilitate the iterative process required for qualitative research. The software program assisted with coding, (re)organizing, and producing various iterations of the first and second cycles of coding and data analysis. Known as computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software or CAQDAS, MAXQDA did not replace anything in the analysis process; rather, it assisted with various stages of coding methods (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2009). CAQDAS was essential in helping me to keep record of my analytic thoughts about the data. MAXQDA offered tools for coding, but also provided ways to support the analytical development of codes by using coding hierarchies, commenting, definitions, memos, grouping, and modeling.

CAQDAS also provided easy storage and easy access to the large amounts of interview data obtained in this dissertation. I completed MAXQDA computer software training with the Odum Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and worked closely with the group for guidance on the best way to utilize the software program throughout the coding and analysis process. I specifically used MAXQDA to aid with specific aspects of coding such as attaching keywords to segments of data, keeping the data organized and searchable, and to visualize the data. Coding began once the first interview transcript was completed.

First cycle coding.

According to Saldaña (2009) there are numerous first cycle coding methods to choose from. Attribute coding, for example, is a grammatical method in which the researcher records basic descriptive information such as the fieldwork setting, participant characteristics or demographics, and time frame (see also Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Attribute coding is a basic type of coding useful for qualitative studies with multiple participants and sites. Attribute coding was key for this research as the professionals interviewed represented various aspects of the public relations industry and held a range of positions. Capturing information from the interviewee profile and entering it into MAXQDA became helpful when drawing comparisons and similarities across data during the analysis. As previously mentioned, an interviewee profile was created in order to capture demographic information about each study participant. Saldaña (2009) refers to this as attribute coding, which helps with data management and in the analysis and interpretation process.

The initial, or open, coding method used in this dissertation allowed summarization of the interview transcript data. Using a constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the first cycle coding process began with a careful line-by-line reading of interview transcripts and then a reflection on the initial core meanings, patterns, and themes of the content. For ease of preliminary data organization, I employed descriptive coding and assigned broad codes according to interview questions. Descriptive coding allowed me to inventory the data according to the topics discussed. For example, if a study participant provided a description of engagement, that section of text was coded, "definition of engagement." Additionally, I created codes and subcodes that fell under what I considered to be portrayals of engagement drawn from the interviews that still reflected the topics discussed, such as, "description," "relation to interaction," "synonyms," and "what engagement looks like" (see Figure 5). Further, this approach forced a careful examination of the data as a starting point. The categorization of data at this point was conducted at a basic level in order to obtain a grasp of the study.

Figure 5. Initial cycle coding example

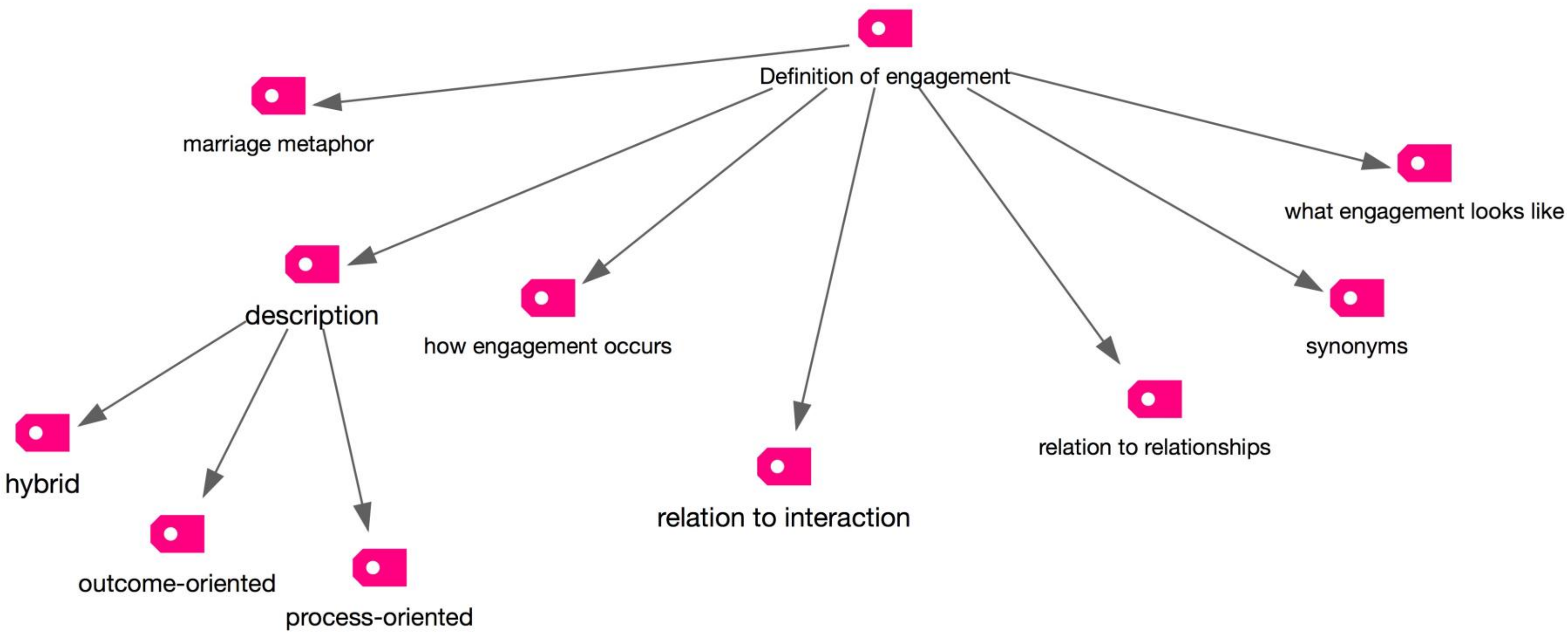

Figure 5. Initial cycle coding descriptions of engagement were coded as “definition of engagement.” The figure indicates codes and subcodes assigned to the “definition of engagement” category.

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) described in vivo coding as part of an elemental coding approach, which is a foundational method for grounded theory. In vivo coding, also referred to as literal or verbatim coding, uses a word or short phrases drawn from the participant and is used as codes. For example, when examining the initial cycle code, relation to relationships, practitioners described how engagement relates to relationships. I identified in vivo codes such as, "relationships are two-way," "if they're not getting what they need, want, or expect they're not going to engage," or "relationship is the goal." From these codes, I began to look for patterns. This tactic proved useful in order to scrutinize the verbatim meanings practitioners ascribed to engagement and how engagement is performed as part of the strategy used to cultivate and maintain organization—public relationships. The use of in vivo coding honors the practitioners' voice in terms that held significance to them. Again, during this phase of coding recurring patterns of similarities and differences began to emerge.

Second cycle coding.

A second round of coding was employed as a way to reorganize and reanalyze patterned data coded in the first cycle. As Saldaña (2009) suggested, data that were conceptually similar were merged, and some codes eliminated from the coding scheme because of redundancy or they were no longer useful as the analysis moved forward. Recoding allowed smaller categories, themes, and concepts to develop. Focused coding is a type of second cycle coding that enables the researcher to develop categories and then compare newly constructed codes. For example, practitioners described various ways in which stakeholders can be emotionally engaged with their organizations which can connect them to the values and mission of the organization (see Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1. Second cycle coding example

Figure 5.1. Second cycle coding allows the reorganization and grouping of similar codes. The figure indicates the merging of codes assigned to the category “public emotional investment.”

This second round of coding allowed further categorization that considered the "public's emotional state" of being engaged with an organization and the context of what that means. With each iterative process, the overall goal is to become intimately familiar with each interview as if they were a stand-alone entity (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). As such, I employed a within-case analysis approach that allowed the unique patterns from each practitioner interview to emerge. In order to examine the data from a contrary perspective, I also analyzed interviews based on searching cross-case patterns.

Jottings and Memo Writing

Jottings are mental notes that are made in response to a study participant's interview. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) suggest that jottings signal mindfulness during the coding process (See Appendix C), which is important for new interpretations, leads, and connections to other parts of data. The reflections are sometimes referred to as "bread crumbs" that are expanded through memo writing (p. 95). Specifically, I employed jottings to string together ideas developed from pieces of interview data. I wrote these ideas, insights, and other jottings of what I learned throughout the study and wove them into the final analysis.

Corroborating and Validating Results

Corroborating and validating results are important to the data analysis and interpretive process. Both processes were conducted from data collection through analysis in order to present trustworthy results in this dissertation. As such, member checks were an important part of the design strategy (See Appendix D), which sought study participant feedback and discussion to help verify and glean further insights and information from previous conversations with participants (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). Allowing participants to verify conclusions I drew from our conversations allowed them to provide their impressions about big-picture assumptions and confirm whether those assumptions were accurately reflected. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña stress the importance of maintaining open communication with study participants throughout the study.

Confirming and Verifying Findings

Next, the process of testing and confirming research findings help validate "the goodness" of those findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). However, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña first warn that analytic biases can weaken or invalidate findings. There are many potential analytic biases, for example, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña describe elite bias as placing considerable weight on the things that certain study participants say over others. These participants can be high-status or more articulate than other participants. As described in the results, I attempted to overcome this bias by interviewing a fairly even distribution of mid-career managers and senior executives. Additionally, there are three marketing professionals who bring a different perspective to the research than the standard public relations practitioner.

Nonetheless, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña offer a number of ways for qualitative researchers confirm and verify their findings. The two primary areas adopted during this research were triangulation by data source (i.e., interviews) and theory. Triangulating by data source helped to corroborate similar or dissimilar findings between different sources (i.e., public relations professionals vs. marketing professionals or senior executives vs. mid-career managers). In addition to using triangulation as a strategy, I employed a tactic of examining outliers that emerged from the data as a way to protect against self-selecting biases and enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

After intensive codifying of the data, my analysis consisted of reviewing the themes and patterns that emerged from the final stage of coding that generated theory-building propositions. These propositions linked to proposed relationships between variables and constructs. Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007) refer to this as "pattern-matching" between theory and data. The goal was then to write theoretical arguments that effectively provided a logical link between constructs within the propositions. Additionally, some of these theoretical arguments allowed me to provide visual theoretical summaries created using MAXQDA's MAXMaps function. These graphical summaries, aided in the effort to construct meanings that tie back existing theory and the research questions of how public relations professionals describe the characteristics of engagement, how they engage their publics, and how they describe successful engagement efforts.

Eisenhardt (2007) suggests an essential feature of theory building research is comparing emergent constructs with existing literature. Doing so may expose conflicts within my findings. On the other hand, the literature can also discuss similar findings that help connect underlying similarities of the proposed phenomenon.

Reflexivity

Qualitative researchers can seldom separate who they are from the research and the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For this reason, reflexivity is a crucial component that should be incorporated into interpretivist/qualitative research. Reflexivity is a continuous mode of self-analysis that infuses every aspect of the research process (Hertz, 1996). As an active participant throughout this research process, being reflexive about my role has forced me to take a critical examination of how my professional background, experiences, and biases shaped the direction of this project (Creswell, 2014; Daymon & Holloway, 2010) from selecting the research topic to choosing to interview public relations practitioners. Daymon and Holloway suggested these subjectivities do not diminish the research, but instead are invaluable toward broadening the scope of the research. Additionally, providing and applying my own lens has helped me keep sight of the research's purpose and remain aware of my position throughout. Maintaining this awareness has been essential to rounding out my doctoral studies and starting me on a journey within the academy as a junior faculty member and independent researcher.

To begin, my professional background influenced my interest in and how this topic was selected. I transitioned from life as a television reporter to an internal communications manager with a health care organization. I literally handpicked the job I would accept. The manager in the department who interviewed me handed me a list of open positions with job descriptions and asked which interested me most. I chose Internal Communications Manager. A decade of news reporting had not trained me for public relations nor had my educational background. However, taking on the role of reporter-in-residence suited me well. Over the years, I realized there was so much about public relations that I did not know. I could not describe what I did not know, but I knew as a professional, something was missing. After transitioning into the role of media relations manager, I went back to school to obtain a master's degree in Organizational Communication. This is where the world of communication research and theory was revealed. Over and over, I said to myself, "that's what this is called." I realized there were specific terms for the various functions of my job. However, after my degree, I had a new confidence about myself as a practitioner. My language and the way that I spoke began to change. I talked about conducting communication audits with my colleagues, and SWOT analyses with my managers. I embodied what it meant to be a public relations practitioner.

Along came social media. The organization, as a whole, was conservative in many of its approaches; however, I was the rebel practitioner in my department. I always wanted the team to take risks that may influence (for the better) our relationship with our stakeholder groups. I led the effort for us to establish presence on the various social media/social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube). However, what we lacked was strategy. If we had a story we wanted to share with the media, we sent a press release through our traditional channels and then we would tweet about it and sit back, wait, and watch. We did not know what to watch for since we did not understand the importance of measurement and evaluation. We were still quantifying media counts. Nonetheless, I knew social media would change how public relations practitioner's conducted their daily work. People had the ability to create and share their own stories using social networking sites. Organizations could do the same without relying on traditional gatekeepers (i.e., editors, journalists). I was drawn to understand how and why. For me, that meant walking away from reaching the next rung on the corporate ladder in order to explore social media research.

I became particularly interested in social media engagement. How do organizations (non-government organizations) use social networking sites to engage and mobilize their publics? Once I began to immerse myself into the literature, I kept asking myself, what was engagement? I examined the term from various angles (e.g., employee, stakeholder, political) and disciplines (organizational communication, interpersonal communication, political communication, public relations). As a former public relations practitioner, naturally I paid special attention to how public relations scholars defined the term. However, what I did not see in the literature was an effort to ask practitioners how they think about and use the term. What do the women and men who do the work daily mean when they refer to engagement?

Instead of maintaining distance from the subject, as is the case with the positivist view, allowing me to unpack the experiences of practitioners appealed to me about qualitative research and why I chose the approach for this research. Prior to my career as a public relations practitioner, I spent a decade as a broadcast news reporter. This is where I learned that asking many people the same or similar question(s) and receiving various answers can help uncover the truth. Therefore, I wanted public relations practitioners to help me answer my research questions by sharing their diverse perspectives of engagement through the stories they share of how they use the term.

In summary, this chapter outlined the importance of qualitative research as a way to gain deeper understandings of phenomena in real-world settings through individual experiences. This section also detailed the qualitative strategies and added a reflexive component that highlighted my motivations for the research. All of which served as an aid and not hindrance throughout the research data collection and analysis process.

Chapter 6 demonstrates that practitioners do not shy away from thinking about the ways in which they use terminology in practice. In fact, each of the professionals described in the next section were thrilled to participate in this dissertation research.

CHAPTER 6: Results

This chapter describes the results of twenty in-depth interviews conducted with public relations practitioners to examine how these professionals describe the features of engagement and its uses in the work that they perform daily. The coding of common themes into categories, as suggested by the coding method of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), revealed complex and multi-layered perspectives and attitudes about the term.

The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the participants interviewed for this study. Following that is an analysis of categories to emerge from the qualitative data.

Participants

Twenty public relations practitioners who live in five states (Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, North Carolina, and Utah) were interviewed for this research. Interviews lasted between 60 and 75 minutes. The shortest interview was 45 minutes and the longest was 1 hour and 15 minutes. The average interview time was 61 minutes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, five of the 20 practitioners interviewed asked for their names to remain confidential. Thus, first names and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality. The twenty interviews resulted in 372 pages of single-spaced transcripts. Interviews were analyzed according to the processes described in Chapter 5.

Fourteen of the interviewees were women, seven were African-American practitioners, one was Hispanic, one was a Pacific-Islander, and one was biracial. The most-experienced professional had worked in public relations for 32 years. The least-experienced person just changed careers and had only practiced public relations for one year at the time of the interview. The average number of years of experience in public relations was 16.9 years. About half of the practitioners were 35–44 years old, seven were 45–54 years old, and two were 25–34 years old.

Interviewees represent a wide range of industries. Five practitioners work in healthcare, with one specifically working in healthcare technology, six professionals work in government, one in the software industry, five in various aspects of nonprofit work such as education and sports, one interviewee works for an insurance company, and two work for agencies. Additionally, interviewees represent various organizational perspectives: ten work in external relations, five work in a combination of internal and external relations, two each work in employee relations and community relations, and one works in development (see Table 6).

Table 6

Study Participant Demographics

Name	Title	Years in PR profession	Industry/sector	Organizational area
Alli	Social Media Employee & Engagement Specialist	8.5	Software	Employee Relations
Amy	Senior Public Affairs Specialist	18	Government	External Relations
Anne	Vice President Marketing and External Relations	20	For-profit, Insurance	External Relations
Autumn	Public Relations Manager	12	For-profit, Real Estate	External Relations
Curtis	Vice Chancellor of Communications	29	Non-profit, Education	Internal/External
Cynthia	Public Affairs Specialist	19	Government	Internal/External
Jessica	Senior Public Information Officer	1	Government	External Relations
Jill	Associate Dean and Chief Communications Officer	28	Non-profit, Academic Medicine	Internal/External
John	Public Affairs Officer	1.5	Government	External Relations
Juan Carlos	Community Engagement Manager	14	Government	Community Relations
Kim	Senior Director, Development Communications	18	Non-profit	Development
Kristi	Senior Director Product Marketing	14	Healthcare Technology	External Relations
Leslie	System Manager, Internal Communications	22	Healthcare	Employee Relations
Lisa	Owner	6	Agency	External Relations
Michael	Senior Vice President Marketing & Communications	30	Healthcare	Internal/External
Najuma	President/Owner	16	Agency	External Relations
Sabrina	Director of Strategic Communications	15	Non-profit, Sports	Internal/External
Shane	Lead Communication Specialist	6	Non-profit, Healthcare	External Relations
Stacy	Senior Public Affairs Specialist	28	Government	Community Relations
Steve	Senior Associate Director of Athletics for Strategic Communications	32	Non-profit, Sports	External Relations

The organizations range in size from a one-person public relations agency to a healthcare organization with tens of thousands employees.

Study participants have varied titles although the type of position each holds falls into one of two categories: 12 are mid-career/managers and eight are senior executives. The duties of both groups range from developing strategy for their organization to the execution of tactics. Strategy is 40–75 percent of what senior executives said they performed in their work, while the execution of tactics by managers ranges from 40–70 percent.

Even with the variety of titles, none included the term "public relations"; however, "public affairs" or "public information" titles are reflected by the five government employees; and "communication(s)" for the seven participants who work for healthcare and nonprofit organizations; one practitioner's title indicates "relations," and one practitioner holds a title with "engagement" specifically represented. Additionally, three participants' duties focus on marketing strategies for their organizations; however, they consider themselves public relations practitioners by training.

Capturing perspectives of public relations practitioners that vary across industries provides the richness in data analysis that is needed and sheds light on the similarities and differences that provide an explanation of how professionals describe the engagement that they conduct in their daily practice. What follows is an examination of the results from participant interviews and the important themes that emerged. The following section explores categories that emerged from the various ways that practitioners frame descriptions of engagement.

"Do I want to empower them, or do I want to entertain them?"—Emotion and (Re)action

The first codes to emerge consider how practitioners characterize engagement as two constructs—emotion and action. Six of 20 study participants describe engagement as an approach their organizations employ to trigger the feelings or emotions from members of their stakeholder groups. The interview data indicate while triggering an emotional state, engagement also facilitates a reaction or an action from members, which can lead to changes or modifications in members' behaviors. Reaction refers to the stakeholders' active response, through word or deed, spurred as the result of an emotion triggered by the organization. Action, on the other hand, signifies stakeholders doing something or acting on something proactively.

Action—"We are getting them to do something, either participate in a process or modify behavior."

Participants indicate the goal of engagement is not only to get individuals to receive and process information disseminated by the organization, but also for stakeholder members to respond, or "do something" with the information. The "doing" could involve sharing the information with others, commenting on social media content, or offering a voice within the workplace. Amy, a communicator for city government, notes:

> We are getting them to do something, either participate in a process or modify behavior, or even if it is something like, hey [the] holidays are coming up, you need to not put your trash can out on a Tuesday, you need to now put it out on a Wednesday and they do that and they are not angry because they don't miss collection.

Kristi, a healthcare technology communicator, describes engagement as getting the other party to act, whether it is to buy a product or use a service. She refers to the action as "an exchange. To me . . . engagement is that there are two people . . . and we are exchanging something. It could be a conversation, it could be a word, it could be a file, it could be anything . . . both parties are engaged in sharing back and forth." Action-oriented words suggest *what* the organization is trying to get stakeholders to do, including interact, participate, and offer feedback (See Figure 7 on p. 96).

Emotion—"Make them care . . . make them feel like they know what's going on."

First, respondents (6/20) describe engagement as "a state of how people feel rather than an action." Jill, a chief communications officer, explains, "I feel like engagement is not necessarily something that you can do to somebody. But that you can help make them feel." Jill then says,

> . . . [I]f our goal . . . is to inform and engage, that means to educate somebody. To tell them something they may not know, inform, but also to engage, make them care . . . make them feel like they know what's going on. . . . being informed makes you feel a part of something bigger and makes you feel like a valued member of [the] community.

Michael, a senior executive with a healthcare organization, determines his employees are emotionally invested when they have "skin in the game." To him emotional investment translates to employees feeling connected to the mission and work of the organization. Michael believes engagement starts with a positive or negative emotional connection or interaction that can then lead to a change in mindset or behavior. He also says:

> All of us at the leader level . . . spend a lot of time in making sure that 12,000 people [and] the ones for whom we are as responsible within our own areas, are as connected and understand how their role fits in . . . helping people to understand the work that I've asked them to do and why that work is important and how that work supports the goals and the strategy of [the organization].

Another participant, Alli, a technology software communicator, states it is important for stakeholders to, "Feel like the company cares about you."

The emotion construct includes words participants used when the organization attempted to influence *how* stakeholder groups feel towards the organization, such as "valued," "connected," and "empowered" (See Figure 7 on p. 94).

For example, Alli, who teaches employees how to use social media for a software company, says:

> If I have a training program . . . and if I go back and look and see that I had a ton of people come out to my LinkedIn workshop on profiles, in my mind that was a good class. I have a lot of questions, it started a lot of conversations, [and] again, those people were feeling comfortable like they could really get into the conversation and in my mind that leads to engagement and that feeling of empowerment and belonging.

Additionally, as noted earlier by Michael, the feeling of being emotionally invested can also lead to a greater allegiance to the organization's purpose especially when the values associated with the purpose also align with the stakeholders' values. The next section highlights what it means to be an insider and an evangelist.

"They're in the know and they're an insider."

Study participants indicate that one of their objectives as practitioners is to engage internal and external stakeholders so that they feel a sense of alignment to the organization's mission, which in turn can trigger an emotion. Curtis, senior executive in higher education, states, "We need to make sure we are conveying alignment or trying to find ways to ensure alignment of understanding, values, etc." As Jill, an executive with an academic medical center, describes it, when employees can relate emotionally to the organization's mission, they feel like an organizational insider:

> . . . when you feel like you're an insider, you feel like you're valued and important. And when you feel like you're valued and important, you feel a part of something and want to be a part of the mission and the goal and your work is part of moving toward that.

Leslie, an internal communications manager for an academic medical center, adds, "What they [leadership] want to see is people who are . . . coming to work, they are excited to be there, they are doing their best, they feel like they can give their all and they are really a component of the organization." As a component of the organization, she says, employees become invested in the success of the organization.

Cynthia, a public affairs specialist, says helping employees feel like an organization insider is most crucial for managers to consider during decision-making moments that affect staff and their work:

> I think when you are going to implement a new program sometimes people tend to work in siloes and then introduce the program to the staff that are going to initiate it . . . .[E]ngagement comes in before that decision is even made . . . .Thoughts are thrown out, ideas are thrown out and there is dialogue between both groups [managers and staff]. … So, I think engagement is key in the success of your program. It gives you buy-in from the staff because they have had the opportunity to craft the program.

Amy agrees that when stakeholders are informed of the actions and decisions of the organization, they feel empowered. "They are empowered because they are educated because they are engaged and they can take information back to . . . make change." This level of stakeholder investment helps the organization build brand equity and social capital.

"On a very basic level . . . [it's] feeling like they know what is happening at the company," explains Alli. "Are there articles on the intranet that actually let them know what is going on? Are executives available to answer questions? . . . [E]lements like that lead to the feeling . . . you are an engaged employee."

While engagement may trigger an emotion, other practitioners were more interested in what or how engagement could lead stakeholder members to become so invested with the organization that they take a step further than expressing their interest. These communicators want stakeholders to experience emotion greater than interest; a signal to others there is an allegiance to the organization and its mission.

"They move from just being interested into evangelists on your behalf."

A few participants differentiate between a stakeholder member's interest in the organization and being loyal and dedicated to the organization and its mission. Leslie, an internal communications manager for a healthcare organization, refers to it as having a certain "ownership" in the organization.

Kim, a senior director in higher education, says when an organization's mission and values align with the stakeholder member's own values, a shift occurs and engagement can lead stakeholders to advocate for the organization:

> . . . You want to create brand lovers right? You want to create advocacy . . . that is really I think the manifestation of engagement is advocacy. You have got not just people who are willing to be engaged but when they move from just being interested into evangelists on your behalf then you are like cooking with hot grease . . . because your efforts are paying dividends in a way that you can't pay for. . . . You can't buy advocacy.

The 18-year veteran adds that practitioners work on behalf of their organizations and stakeholders, but nothing beats the stakeholder taking ownership in the engagement and intervening on behalf of the organization.

> Who are you going to listen to? Are you going to listen to the owner of a new restaurant tell you how amazing the restaurant is? . . . Or if your best friend who you go out to dinner with every Thursday night for the past 10 years says, 'oh my gosh you got to try this place.' . . . [I]t is a no brainer right?

Michael, a senior executive for a healthcare organization, refers to engagement as the stakeholder being, "on the court and in the game." Further, he explains, "The role we want them [employees] to take in advancing that mission or advancing that body of work or to be a champion for a cause."

Curtis calls this level of engagement by the stakeholder member "evangelism" and says evangelists deliver the organization's message to other like-minded individuals on the organization's behalf.

> We want to turn you . . . from being just somebody who is involved to be an evangelist. When I have got you evangelizing for me, now the engagement is, gosh, magnified many times over . . . . [I]f you want to find the zealots, you are going to find the people who are predisposed to engage.

Typically, the message from the organization must provide some level of "stickiness," according to Curtis, so that evangelists will want to share the message with others. However, he admits evangelists can have and then deliver to others a different interpretation of the organization's intended message. In that case, Curtis says going back to some of the original engagement efforts with the members can help to reinforce the organization's stated mission. While the organization may believe evangelists are empowered to speak on behalf of the organization, they are urged by practitioners to stay on script.

When talking about engaging the media on a daily basis, Autumn, a public relations manager for a real estate service, uses descriptive language similar to what is depicted above. "I will try to go above and beyond to get them content and information that they need. And it's because I need them to be an advocate, I need that relationship."

Figure 6. Engagement Foundations: Emotion and (Re)action

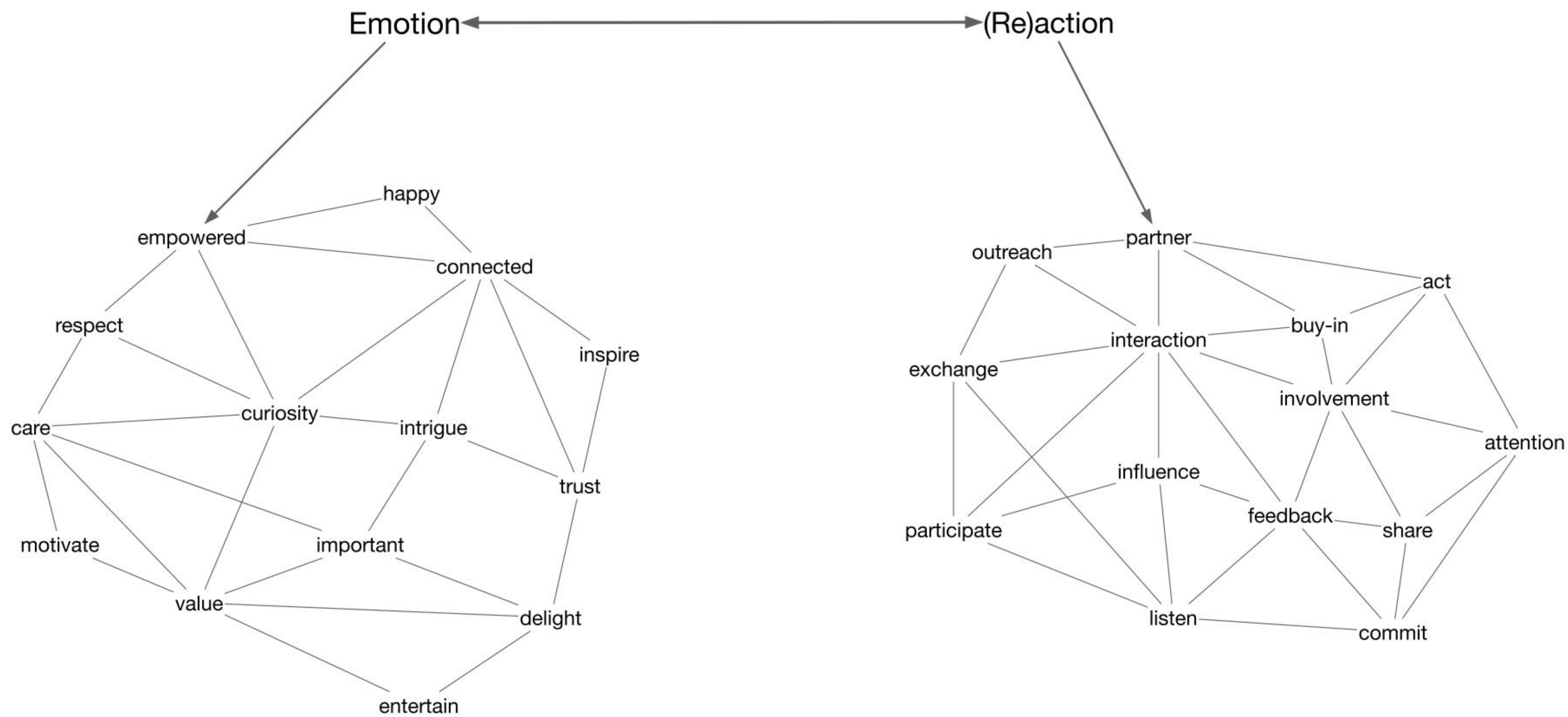

Figure 6. Engagement Foundations: Emotion and (Re)action. This illustrates terms associated with emotion and (re)action

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Figure 6 includes the various emotion and action words used by participants. This diagram provides the two constructs, emotion (positive and negative) and action, and the words associated with them. The arrows between the constructs suggest the engagement can trigger emotion and/or action. Arrows point from the constructs to indicate the various word associations. Both constructs eventually point to the practitioners' goal of their engagement efforts, two-way communication or dialogue.

Two-way communication—"You have my full attention, I have your full attention."

In addition to emotion and action, professionals are working toward what Michael refers to as, "the foundation of true engagement," which he says is two-way communication or dialogue with their stakeholder groups. Cynthia states engagement creates an opportunity for dialogue. Her explanation of engagement consists of individuals participating in an exchange where both parties feel the freedom to speak and are open to listening to each other.

> If you are going to engage with someone that means we are talking now and you have my full attention, I have your full attention, we are dialoguing about a topic . . . . If we are interacting . . . it is just like, "oh yeah hi," [I] could be talking to you and somebody else and there is not that point where we are just focused in on what each other is saying.

As an independent contractor, Lisa has worked most of her six years as a practitioner with membership organizations on a federal and local level. "Engagement includes a facet of attention," she says.

> There are some people who are members [of her former organization] who don't even know it . . . they have their payroll department probably just pay the dues every year and they are not really . . . paying attention [to the organization] or interacting. They are not engaged at all . . . . So someone who is engaging more, I feel like their relationship would have more impact on both . . . members and on us as an organization.

It is important to note that while two-way communication is the end goal, practitioners identify two-way communication in various ways. For example, feedback from employees or from a fan or follower on social media starts the two-way communication process. On the contrary, no emotion and no action from the stakeholder toward the practitioner's efforts, signify non-engagement. Not liking a Facebook post or not retweeting an organization's tweet, or an employee not participating or passively listening to what the organization says demonstrates disengagement, according to some participants.

This third construct, two-way communication/dialogue, indicated by the dotted lines leading back and forth to emotion and (re)action, is a continuous process that organizations attempt to navigate with stakeholder groups (see Figure 6.1). The positive or negative emotion triggers a continuous process that organizations hope will lead to two-way communication. Similarly, the two-way arrows between the action construct and two-way communication indicate an outcome organizations hope will occur after engagement. Hence, engagement is a continuous process, that, according to interviewees, does not abruptly end after the emotion or action occurs.

Figure 6.1. Emotion, Action and Two-way Communication Constructs

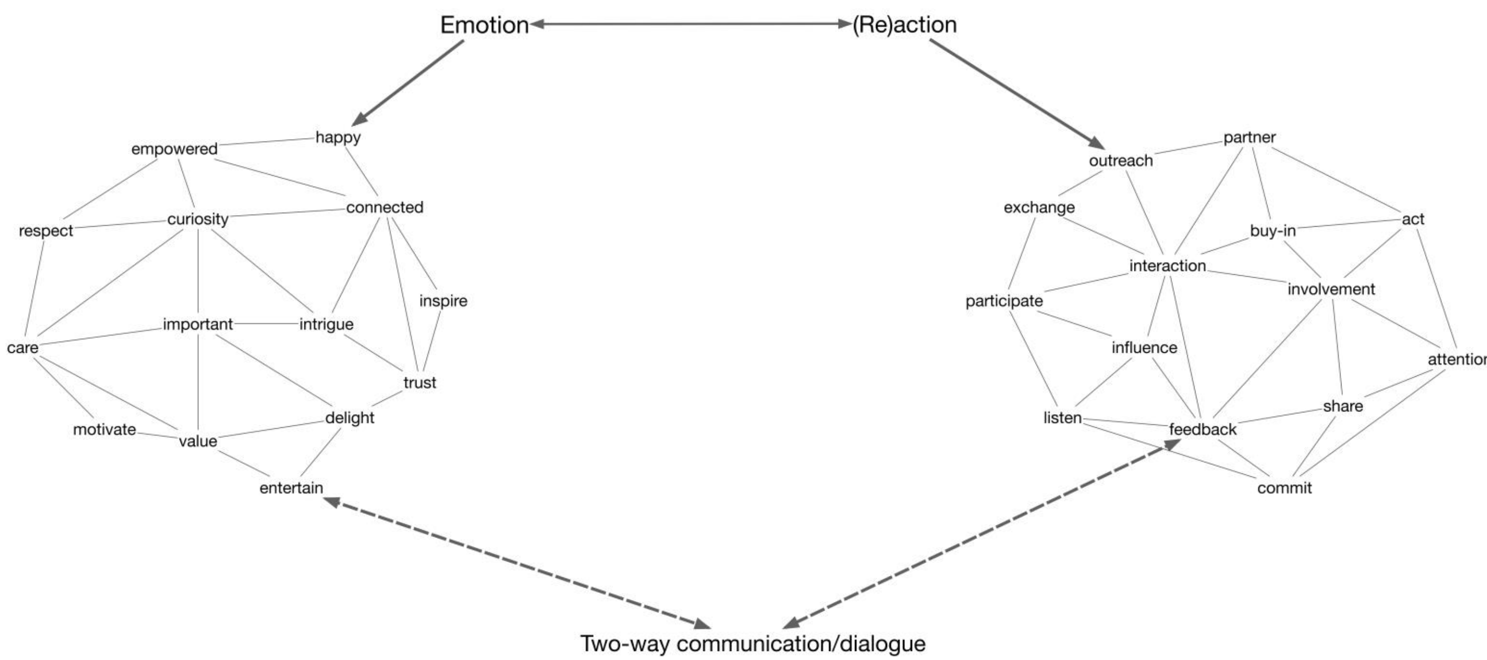


Figure 6.1. Emotion, Action and Two-way Communication Constructs. This illustrates the continuous process to lead to two-way communication.

In summary, beyond the opportunity to create dialogue between both parties, some participants felt emotion(s) triggered by the organization can lead both internal and external stakeholders to experience a deeper connection toward the organization. Additionally, interview data show these practitioners agree that engagement can help stakeholders feel a part of “something bigger” and, ultimately, engaging stakeholders is necessary for the organization to fulfill its mission. The following section explores how practitioners describe features of engagement once they struggle with how it fits into their daily workload. The features refer to the interpersonal and virtual ways practitioners see themselves “doing” engagement.

Organizational Engagement—Interpersonal and Virtual

Study participants classified the first steps of engagement as triggering emotion or action. Beyond that, professionals identify more detailed elements of engagement. This section examines coding that reveals the differences between the two types of engagement practitioners identified – interpersonal engagement and virtual engagement.

Interpersonal engagement—“Call me old school.”

Michael, Curtis, Jill, Stacy, and Anne serve in more senior-level positions within their organizations than many of the other participants. Each has practiced public relations for at least 20 years. Additionally, they express the most concern over how descriptions of engagement have evolved through the years. Curtis, a 29-year communications professional, made reference to how it was done in “the old days.” He suggests traditional forms of engagement that involved human connection, such as face-to-face interactions, allowed the organization to drive its agenda, but with little opportunity for stakeholders to respond in that moment:

> In the old days you might have had somebody go up and speak for 20 minutes; it could be an organization’s CEO or someone like that. They are going to speak,

> they are going to talk, and they would have walked off the stage and said, 'today I engaged with the public.' And if they [the CEO] responded to three questions they'd say, 'and I talked to them, I answered questions.'

He says engagement was much more about human contact and human interaction than about online occurrences where, he believes, meaning can be lost.

> Interaction [as it relates to engagement] was much more literal. I am interacting with people, I am standing there, they are in front of me, I am talking to them, I have probably shaken their hand and making eye contact and they are going to walk away thinking, 'I looked into that person's eye representing the organization and they said something to me.'

A communicator for 28 years, Jill agrees that in-person connection is an essential element for organizations to maintain effective engagement with their stakeholders. She says it is conveying messages in a much different way than sending an email or text message:

> When you meet somebody face-to-face there's a different engagement. There's a different way of communicating . . . . For all audiences, I feel engagement is most successful face-to-face. Meetings, personal communication; . . . call me old school but I think that there is a time and place for texting and emailing. Obviously, in today's world, you couldn't really do without it. But I hope that at some point . . . it will never fully take away from the more-personal engagement.

Stacy, a senior public affairs specialist, says she prefers employing traditional strategies as a way to reach her organization's stakeholders because these approaches are effective particularly when working with communities. She states that the face-to-face approach that gets the most response from residents:

> . . . We use a lot of tactics and strategies to heighten awareness and solicit support of [the organization's] goals. . . . [T]o me, the programs that I really consider engagement . . . are the ones where people come together face-to-face or either there is some kind of one-on-one direct contact even over the phone. That is [when] I have found true engagement to take place.

She adds that "real relationship[s] and collaborations and understanding[s] take place" at the point of true engagement encouraged through human connections. True engagement, from her perspective, is when residents alter their feelings about the organization after coming to understand its position.

Anne also discusses the best way to engage is through building relationships in-person with clients. As a 20-year public relations veteran, she says her industry thrives on one-on-one relationships formed between the organization's agents and their current clients or prospects. "I remember the good old days when engagement would have meant I get to learn more about you [the client]. … Then ultimately at the end of the process, I can consider you a prospect. … I have started a relationship with you that I can turn over to my agent."

As a senior executive for a 118-year-old for-profit organization, Anne says her company has been slow to adapt to the changes in communication technology, but she believes it is for good reason. Much of the online and social changes mean losing the years of relationships that helped build the organization's reputation. She notes, for example:

> Your grandmother bought this policy. She has passed on. Now the daughter is getting the claim check from us. We are sending you the tool kit about just financial literacy in general. Our goal is to continue to be in your life after the claim check. Historically, we did not have to worry about that because the agents went door-to-door. We did not have to worry about trying to figure out a way to get in your house. He knocked on your door every week. Yeah, that relationship–we are a part of your advisors team. I mean the mutual agent was like the trusted financial advisor.

While not practicing public relations for as long as the others, Lisa says the personal touch with stakeholders is what made a previous job easier:

> . . . [M]embers were local and so we would have face-to-face meetings with them, I would take them to lunch, bought them a cup of coffee, find out from them what they needed from us as an organization moving forward . . . . [W]e did have a lot of events where people came directly to us . . . . So in some ways trying to engage with them was easier . . . because . . . I could kind of put my finger on the pulse of what they were doing just by meeting them or trying to meet with them.

Sabrina brings an entirely different interpersonal communication perspective as it relates to her job. She and her team spend a lot of time working on college campuses. Therefore, it is important that as many details as possible are considered ahead of stakeholder meetings. Sabrina describes how losing the personal touch can be detrimental to any relationship that the organization has established with the stakeholder groups. She describes the lengths her team goes through to make connections during stakeholder meetings:

> . . . [T]he actual audience and stakeholder group . . . are very diverse we try to make sure that there is time, at least 5-10 minutes, where our team is . . . introducing ourselves to everyone around the room. Making sure that we are able to physically connect, handshake, pat on the back . . . just asking them, 'Is there anything on your mind . . .

Sabrina makes it clear that engagement was a deliberate approach by her organization to level the playing field and bring down barriers:

> . . . even how we set up and establish the room when we are on campus. We try to neutralize the room as much as we can and . . . make sure that our team is intertwined and integrated with the campus community, and that is very intentional because what we don't want to do is for there to be a perceived power dynamic in the room because that can get in the way of people feeling comfortable, safe, and feeling like their position isn't valued.

"Engagement in a sense is like a marriage."

A small portion of respondents drew metaphoric connections between engagement conducted by the organization and the more-intimate type of connection between individuals in a relationship. For example, Stacy suggests that "successful engagement is much like a marital engagement" between the organization and stakeholders. Ignoring the aspect of love involved in marital engagement, Stacy instead notes this similarity: "Both parties have a responsibility." The organization has a commitment to members of its stakeholder groups. By working directly with residents of her community, Stacy says engagement is establishing a deep bond that is mutual:

> Well I think . . . parties have to realize that they are dependent upon each other for it to work. Both of you have to be willing to recognize your role and come to some understanding . . . . [I]t requires both parties to commit to a relationship at some action.

Kim's perspective as a senior-level development practitioner likens the phases of organizational engagement to the phases of marital engagement that begins with courtship:

> . . . I think there is a metaphorical relationship between levels of engagement and levels of a relationship and so you can call that courtship through marriage right, advocacy being somebody's married to the idea of you, courtship being where they are getting to know you.

She adds:

> I guess I look at . . . the spectrum of engagement as that courtship time . . . . I think we need to look at this with . . . a very 'in the spirit of others.' Not just trying to get you to do what I want you to do kind of a thing but . . . we need to come to the table with this view of, 'is what I have to offer something you need?'

Interestingly, those who made a marital connection with organizational efforts to engage stakeholders were female practitioners. Introducing the marital engagement idea with one of the male respondents drew this response from Steve, an athletics communicator:

> I think it is a different type of engagement. I think that, in the way that you are using that word, I think engagement is far greater, far more intimate, [a] far more personal type of relationship. . . . When I say engagement I can have an engagement with [a newspaper reporter] but I am not marrying him. I don't think it is the same thing.

This section demonstrates that some participants consider the "old school" approaches to engagement are most effective. And an unexpected portion of evidence emerged making a connection between engagement and the courtship phase of marital engagement, which represents an intimate, committed relationship.

As shown in Figure 6.2, emotion or action is triggered by the organization and is done by engaging stakeholder groups interpersonally. Additionally, the end of this model demonstrates the consequences of interpersonal engagement–non-engagement or feedback or modified behavior change(s).

Figure 6.2. Interpersonal Engagement

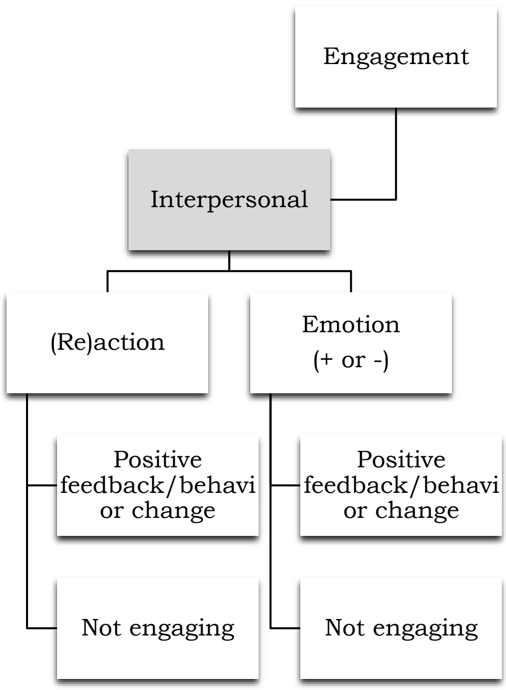


Figure 6.2. Interpersonal Engagement. This model helps to visualize interpersonal the effects of organizations that trigger the (re)active or emotions of stakeholders.

Study participants also shared their fear that these ways of engaging are fading, and the loss of the interpersonal aspects in favor of online approaches means losing human connections with stakeholders. Curtis makes this comparison:

> When I can reach up to you and I can put my hand on top of your hand and say it is going to be ok, that is a different level then me texting you and saying, hey, . . . it is going to be ok. You may be happy either way, but if I put my hand on your hand and patted your hand and said we are going to be ok, you are going to walk away thinking he is full of shit or he actually thinks we are going to be ok.

Over the last decade, public relations practitioners have had to pay more attention to the advancement of communication technologies. In the section to follow, practitioners describe the differences that exist with embracing newer forms of engagement.

Virtual engagement—"Discreet engagement" on social media.

Practitioners believe certain aspects of interpersonal communication that occur between them, as representatives of the organization, and stakeholder groups show signs of waning as advancements in computer-generated communications increase. Participants present social media as a way to exchange engaging with a few individuals or groups in order to reach and potentially engage with the masses. For example, Curtis, a higher education communicator, refers to the subtler ways of engaging through online channels as "discreet engagement."

Practitioners like Alli are being hired by organizations to coach employees on how to use social media tools as part of their jobs. She believes online engagement can be used to build relationships with stakeholders. "I think engagement absolutely strengthens relationships both interpersonally when you are face-to-face with someone, and it can even happen virtually, in my mind, through social [media]." She continued:

> I think a lot of people recognize the importance of social media and they feel like . . . they need to make it part of their professional lives . . . and they recognize the value, but oftentimes they may not know how to execute, they may not know how to send a tweet or [know] what a LinkedIn profile should look . . . . So that is where I come into play.

However, social media also can create more distance and less individual attention that might affect how stakeholders perceive the organization. As Curtis says, " . . . engagement is really almost been completely co-opted by the social media space because so much of what we describe is social media outcomes or engagement."

"Behind the wall of the social media"—Loss of authenticity.

Some participants see the adoption of social media as tools for engagement being a double-edged sword. Although they can reach more individuals and groups, Curtis, a higher education communicator, believes the downside of this discreet form of engagement is that it prevents the organization from presenting itself authentically:

> You have to swap what you would have had in interaction, in person with genuineness and authenticity, [and] in the engagement forum on social media . . . . [Y]ou have to be able to have tone and tenor, and action has to represent eye contact and other types of human interaction and interpersonal that would underscore the values of your organization.

The loss of organizational authenticity due to the increased attention paid to social media engagement, in some ways, also challenges the organization's ability to legitimize itself as a trustworthy, reliable entity, Curtis says. The organization's online tone becomes the virtual blueprint by which messages are delivered and by which stakeholders judge the organization on countless issues such as corporate social responsibility.

> Today, interaction is going to be around or behind the wall of the social media . . . . [I]nteraction is much more; I am talking to you, I might be sharing something with you, sending you something, but I'm not able to establish something that I think has really been invaluable for organizations, and that is you can look at me and see me and talk to me.

Anne, communications executive for an insurance company, also is skeptical about what she has read about the benefits of virtual engagement between organizations and stakeholders. "I am not a big Twitter user, period. I am much more personal, I think . . ." Furthermore she explains:

> Some people say Twitter is the best tool for PR people. I have seen that. Some people say PR owns social. I have heard all of those things . . . . [I]n my industry we do a lot of work in death care, and we do a lot of work in financial planning. Financial planning people are on Twitter, but that is not trending. None of their topics are trending . . . . I am so sensitive to how everybody wants PR to appropriate social, but we oftentimes are not really being authentic in how we are engaging with social . . . . The most recent [article] I read was saying that PR is on social. I said that can be true if you are really being authentic and if you

> are actually engaging in the actual dialogue [and] not just pushing your sales message.

Some participants are skeptical about the value of social media to engage stakeholders, but also seem to recognize its use in their daily work may be inevitable. As a result, they believe there are appropriate norms and routines for social media engagement to be effective that communicators must understand and follow.

"Getting a handle on the tone of conversations."

The tone of a stakeholder member's conversation online is something that these practitioners say they must consider before jumping into the social media fire. As mentioned previously, Alli instructs employees of her software company about how to engage others using social media. She suggests online engagement has social norms that overlap with interpersonal engagement norms:

> Having good intention and actually caring about your audience and . . . thinking of them first is, no matter if it is employee engagement or . . . social media engagement, I think it is going to often get the same result.

That said, a significant portion of the work communicators perform as organization representatives is to disseminate information – a one-way communication practice - and social media provides another venue to accomplish that task. Kim says it's a cost-effective way for practitioners to do the work of the organization:

> I think some of the low-hanging fruit . . . is, of course, social media, . . . so social and all of the sort of various platforms . . . whether they are just liking you or whether they are following you, whether they are watching the videos that you are putting out, whether they are commenting and that sort of a thing, . . . you know, if people are paying attention or not and it didn't cost you a whole lot. So we are keenly aware of the dollar spent.

Online spaces present a new set of routines, rituals, rules, and norms, and these practitioners admit they have yet to fully realize the impact. For example, Alli says engagement is a crucial component of what she teaches employees in her social media workshops. She says being attuned to the audience is one of the first steps of observing social media etiquette.

> . . . [M]ak[e] sure that you know who you are talking to or who you really want to talk to . . . . [T]hen, once you sort of get a taste for that audience, once you are sort of seeing what they are talking about and topic areas that interest them. Sort of getting a handle on the tone of conversations.

At that point, Alli says, her employees are ready to progress to likes, comments, and sharing information. They also must keep stakeholder wants and needs top of mind.

> So, again, once you get to the point where you are ready to share things with them, you are keeping in mind, ok, what is going to be valuable for them, what do they care about?

Amy says there are various steps that occur with online engagement that practitioners might want to carefully consider as part of a new era of engaging stakeholders. The first step is getting stakeholders to engage with the organization's content or message:

> So, it is more than just impressions. More than just reach. Although those are important because building awareness is also a goal that we have in public communication, but to us, engagement, particularly in the social media field, is . . . when they do something with [the post] and they come back at us.

Her explanation of "com[ing] back at us" may point to a second step of online engagement where stakeholders choose to take the next step and engage with, and in some ways on behalf of, the organization:

> . . . [E]ngagement for me is, do you do something with what you are getting from me? Do you do something with it? Are you responding to me, are you asking me questions, are you forwarding it on to your network of friends and family to get information to them, are you liking it, are you leaving comments, are you clicking on the link so that you get more information about the public meeting that you have just been made aware of that is of interest to you and therefore you come to that public meeting?

Participants also acknowledge that stakeholders are bombarded now with more information being delivered to them and more choices offered to them for obtaining information. Yet, there is little evidence to point to these practitioners believing that organizations now have less influence over members of their stakeholder groups as a result. However, public affairs specialist Jessica was one respondent to state that the excessive information choices that stakeholders have affect her decision-making on routing organizational information.

> . . . [I]t becomes more of a choice for someone to tune in or for someone to read your web story because there are so many [to choose from and] there is so much that they can read, there is so much information out there. There is a lot of noise and then there is a lot of legitimate operations.

She does not believe it is the practitioners' role to help stakeholders decode the information they receive, however. Jessica describes an occasion when she wanted to publicize a "feel good" story that promoted her government agency. There is often tension between the agency and the community; however, the story highlighted the agency's involvement in a positive community endeavor. Hoping to publicize the story widely, Jessica says she released the story through social media channels first, deciding against the conventional method of writing a press release and sending it to mainstream media outlets:

> Yeah, it made national news and it trended on Facebook . . . . [T]hat didn't start with a news release, [it] started because people picked up on the Facebook story that I posted and then I returned [to Facebook] to thank our media outlets that showed up [to the event and] posted links to their story. So it wasn't a very traditional approach . . . at all. I am . . . really trying to do my best to . . . respect the digital end . . . but then also respect that the people are driving the coverage.

Jessica's example shows how professionals must strategically determine when a virtual approach is most effective and when an interpersonal approach might be preferred.

"That's the fun part ... there's always something new"

Participants did not agree on best practices for utilizing social media as an engagement tool; however, it became evident that virtual engagement has exposed a generational divide among practitioners who comfortably employ social media engagement and those practitioners who do not engage as comfortably on social media. Jill, a senior executive, comments,

> . . . [T]here are so many new tools. I was just in a meeting yesterday where we talked about new social media tools and tools that are leveling off and tools that are effective. But that's the fun part about being in this profession. Because there's always something new.

Stacy, a senior public affairs specialist who has been with her organization for more than a decade, is concerned about using social media to engage stakeholders. "How many people are really trained in how to use it effectively?" she asked. She continues:

> How to monitor, how to evaluate it? You . . . have younger kids coming out now that are well versed in [social media] . . . . I haven't found . . . where, particularly municipal government, where they have really kept their public relations and public affairs staff [trained] as a commitment on their own. Now, people [practitioners] may go and do it, you know, for themselves. But I think overall the support hasn't . . . been there. I don't necessarily mean proactively not support it; it's just you know due to resources or whatever. I don't think public relations practitioners, that kind of training to keep them current, has not been a priority.

Social media has not been top of mind for senior executives at her organization, says Amy, senior public affairs specialist. She notes that many organizations like her own are not up-to-date on all the fast-moving advances happening with communication and information technologies:

> Social media, I think, is new for organizational leaders and that they are still grappling with what it means. Some of them don't even do it. We have some in our organizational leadership that do not do Facebook, they do not do Twitter, they don't go to YouTube, they have never heard of Instagram . . . . [S]o for them, grasping what the tool is and how important it is and how massive it can be for reach, for engagement, for impressions all that good stuff, they are probably still grappling with it. Some get it. When we provide the data and we provide the analytics . . . . [Y]ou can tell that they are blown away.

Even though executives may not understand digital communication they expect practitioners to demonstrate how social media engagement contributes to the organization's bottom line.

"We posted it, someone read it"—But how do you measure it?

Although some senior managers may not understand the tools, participants say executives understand numbers and want to know how social media helps the organization's bottom line. Therefore, these practitioners draw data from social media metrics to provide a measurable way to explain online engagement efforts to leaders. Najuma, a self-employed practitioner, explains it this way: "Social media actually makes measuring engagement a little bit easier because you do have those metrics, 'likes' and reaches and even web analytics. So there are some things out there that make measuring engagement a little bit easier."

Social media engagement helped Amy, a public affairs practitioner, to elevate her agency's profile in the community during a recent weather event:

> We know social media is where it is at, and it played out in this most- recent winter storm that we just underwent. . . .Over a 5-day period our tweets earned 246,000 impressions. So during this 5-day period we earned almost 50,000 impressions per day. That was 50,000 [sets of] eyes that saw our messaging in their Twitter feed over that 5-day period for the storm. And we noticed the same massive uptick on Facebook for us as well. We grew by almost 400 likes in 5 days. Our total page views in a 5-day period went up 745%. Our video views went up 5,391% over that 5-day period. Our post engagements went up 1,199%. Our reach went up 393%. We reached 71,000 on Facebook. We reached 246,000 on Twitter in 5 days during this winter weather. So that is where people are going to get information. They are not waiting for it to appear in their monthly newsletter in their water bill.

Thus, she also agrees that numbers can show leaders that they are not only reaching stakeholders but also can demonstrate the actions that stakeholders take in response to the organization's message.

In summary, while practitioners say they are navigating new territory, digital communication has become an important part of virtual engagement. The Virtual Engagement model is illustrated in Figure 6.3. Like the Interpersonal Engagement model described earlier, this model also builds on the emotion-(re)action model in that virtual engagement can trigger either a positive or negative emotion or (re)action.

Figure 6.3. Virtual Engagement

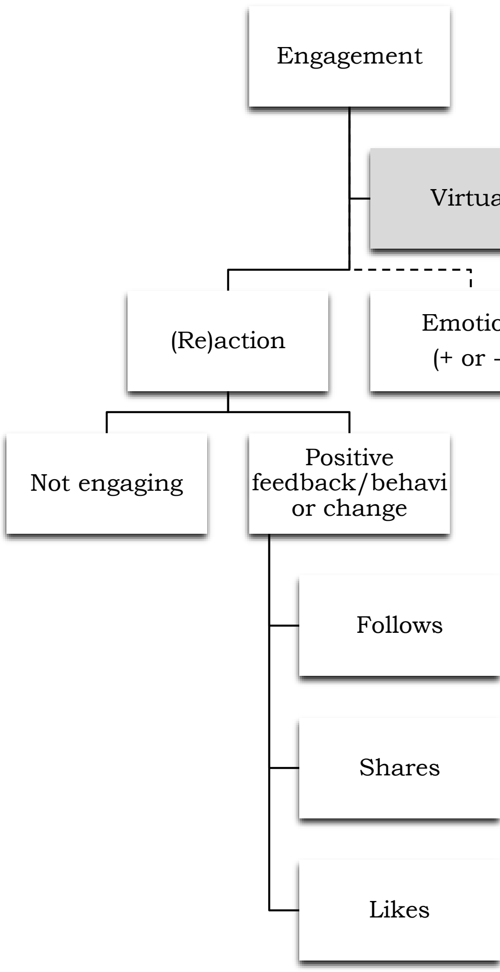


Figure 6.3. Virtual Engagement. This is an illustration of the virtual engagement process as initiated by the organization and responded to by stakeholders.

The Virtual Engagement model shows that communicators, through their engagement efforts, prompt (re)action from stakeholders. (Re)action encourages feedback, which can look like follows, shares, and/or likes from stakeholders; or (re)action can prompt a behavior change. Conversely, no feedback or behavior change can mean there is no response from stakeholders and, therefore, stakeholders are not engaging with the organization. Practitioners believe they can trigger stakeholders to (re)act through their engagement efforts. However, the dotted line from virtual engagement to positive or negative emotion indicates professionals have not yet fully considered how engagement initiatives can trigger the stakeholder's emotion virtually.

Participants not only identify differences between interpersonal and virtual engagement, they also believe that context across organizational business units affect how they describe principles of engagement and implement engagement initiatives with stakeholders. In the following section, practitioners describe how engagement is sometimes viewed within the organization and across business units.

"I think it is fairly understood"–*Segmented engagement.*

Most practitioners spoke of engagement based on one of three perspectives: the work that they perform daily, their work with other units within their organization, and their work with specific stakeholder groups. Hence, these public relations professionals generally believe context will affect how they engage.

Anne is one of three marketing professionals in the study who considers engagement from a sales perspective. She said, "I'm only thinking about engagement as it can lead to a sale. Just to get to that first level of the funnel, the first part of the sales cycle, you have to be willing to engage with me." She continued:

> I don't really want to assume that engagement doesn't start until I get some feedback from you because again, I'm saying if you're willing to continue to be on my mail list, if you're willing to continue to get my emails, if you're willing to continue to engage in this conversation, even if it's one way, because you're not ready to purchase yet. Maybe that's why you haven't engaged with me in the traditional way. I consider it engagement if you haven't shut it down.

Participants point to how people within the same organization can talk about engagement differently. For example, Shane, employed by a healthcare nonprofit agency, seemed frustrated by the multiple ways the term is perceived across business units within his organization.

> I work with marketing colleagues . . . so their idea of engagement is, can they get somebody to do a conversion? . . . Can they get somebody to make the sale, schedule an appointment? . . . [T]o them, that's meaningful engagement. . . .

> [S]ome of the people that I know that work in say, patient relations, the fact that somebody . . . communicates back with them, that's acceptable engagement. And for myself, . . . I try to look at it more in terms of if I say something, will somebody respond? And if they respond, will they continue to respond?

As the lead communication specialist in a department of 16, he offered another example:

> So my colleagues in the HR department, they find that . . . [if] only 80% of employees even filled out the employee engagement survey to see how happy they are . . . if 20% don't even bother, they're writing them off as, well, they're not engaged. And it's like, uh, then what do you mean by engagement? Because they might be engaged, they just don't see validity in the survey. You know what I mean? So it's how the different groups define engagement.

The unit-level perspectives also could involve organization leadership. Practitioners agree that there can be conflicts between balancing an understanding of their work responsibilities, the features of engagement and implementing those features, and then reporting the results to organization leadership. Autumn, who is the only public relations practitioner in a department of four in an organization of more than 1,800 employees, struggles with how to talk about media engagement efforts with organizational leadership. “I don’t really get to use many PR terms because I’m the only one. And I find that people think PR is a verb, or a buzzword, or [writing a] press release is the only thing I do.”

The third way these practitioners discuss engagement involves their interaction with different stakeholders. For example, John, a communications specialist for the federal government, conducts most of his work with the media. He said,

> Engagement is simply the interaction that we have between us, . . . the PR practitioner, and whoever is our public – our audience, if you will. … I would define engagement as the interaction we have with whoever our public is going to be on any certain scenario. So you know, it could be how we interact on social media, it could be how we interact with the media.

Autumn refers to engaging media this way:

> What does this audience need to know and how do they want to know this information? How can we present it to them? When I'm working with the media . . . they're going to get . . . exactly what they need, with a brief tight response so they can't take whatever it is out of context… Everything has to be targeted specifically to this group, what they need to know, how they need to know it, and when they need to know it, and how this will show them that we [the organization] are doing.

Alli, a professional who focuses on social media engagement for a software organization, was one respondent to take the position that engagement is a universally understood and agreed upon term, particularly when applied to employee and social media engagement. She explained it this way:

> . . . when we are talking about a Facebook post and someone mentions 'engagements' it is sort of understood for the most part. . . . [F]or example, I actually see within our reporting capabilities and a lot of our tools and a lot of the analytics dashboards associated with our social media accounts literally there is a field that says 'engagements' and these are big enterprise software that other companies are using. So I think it is fairly understood and then alternately . . . when I hear about employee engagement it is sort of understood in [a] separate capacity.

While Alli believes engagement is commonly understood, Kristi suggests that organizations have taken the term engagement out of context. "I think today engagement has become more of … a way to incorporate entire … focus areas. So, you know, patient engagement, for example, in the healthcare environment, or consumer engagement. We have lost really what that means." She suggests the field has a muddled view of engagement:

> I think what we are trying to get to when we talk about engagement in larger categories is inclusion and . . . this whole tribal sense where you have people that feel connected to your brand, to your message, to whatever it is . . . your initiative that you are doing. That is really what we are trying to get is that sense of connectedness and inclusion and the, 'I am part of something bigger.' I don't think that . . . is engagement.

Even though descriptions of engagement used across organizations may be inconsistent, particularly within the same institution, Shane challenges public relations practitioners to take the lead in helping organizations understand what engagement entails.

> Public relations is a good place to start where when we try to define engagement, it's really based on the relationship, that back and forth. I'm not trying to sell you anything. … I am trying to influence you because I acknowledge your thoughts and concerns are valid.

To summarize, these public relations professionals believe that the features of engagement are segmented and context-specific. The words they assign to the characteristics of engagement, while seemingly well-thought-out and intentional, differ based on three things that emerged from the interview data: 1) the daily job responsibilities of practitioners, 2) their work with other business units within the organization, and 3) the stakeholder group(s) with which the practitioners engaged, whether business units within their organizations or stakeholders outside the organizations.

I created a "segmented engagement" diagram (see Figure 6.4) to help visualize how study participants describe engagement. For example, how a media relations practitioner describes engagement often differs from how an internal communications specialist describes engagement. Distinctions also surface depending on the stakeholder groups assigned to the job function or business unit. As Autumn stated earlier, she is going to ensure that her stakeholder group, the media, gets information disseminated to them quickly, whereas Alli's stakeholder group of employees typically requires constant reminders from top management about the organization's mission and how the mission aligns with the work they perform.

Figure 6.4. Segmented Engagement

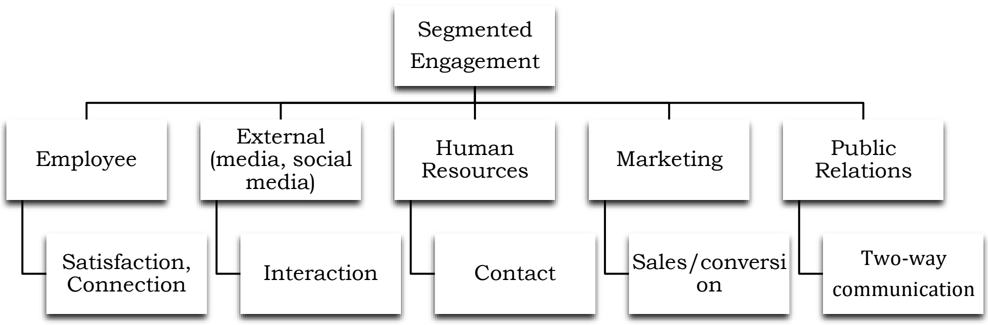


Figure 6.4. Segmented Engagement. This illustrates how organizational business units describe engagement.

Even more striking are the ways that the participants describe the term engagement based on job classification and function, which reflects the practitioner's duty.

Practitioner Duty

During the second cycle of coding, it became clear that practitioners felt they had a role or duty to engage with stakeholder groups, thus *practitioner, or personal duty* emerged as a construct for consideration. For example, senior public affairs specialist – Stacy – said her role is tactical, "at its basic level . . . [I] provide citizens information or to make information accessible to them." Leslie, a mid-career manager in internal communications commented, "Curating information and how we deliver things and how we prioritize things for people to help them with that." Jessica, who is just starting her career as a public relations professional, explains her role as, "communicator, fixer, you know, problem solver, influencer, and I also would say gracious hostess, [and] diplomat as well." Regardless of the channel used, study participants still discuss their role as disseminators of information on behalf of the organization.

Three primary areas comprise the practitioner's duty to engage: 1) organization expectation, 2), stakeholder expectation, and 3) self-expectation. Organization expectation outlines the pressures practitioners feel from top management to engage stakeholders in ways that align with the corporate vision and help to ensure the organization remains profitable. Stakeholder expectation focuses on the practitioner's duty to fulfill the needs of those with concerns about the organization. And finally, self-expectation addresses the pressures practitioners place on themselves to ensure the needs of both the organization and stakeholders are met. What follows is an explanation practitioners provided on what these three areas are and what they mean to the work they perform for their organizations.

Organization expectation.

Participants believe there are certain expectations required by their organization that they must not only consider, but also fulfill when engaging stakeholders. Participants identify three steps that they believe organizational leaders expect of them: to represent the organization's vision, implement engagement initiatives that reinforce that vision, and measure whether the goals have been met. As a representative of the organization, it is the practitioner's responsibility to understand and "live" the corporate vision. As such, they are expected to be able to articulate the vision to both internal and external stakeholder groups. Additionally, as these professionals employ various engagement strategies, there is an expectation by top management that the strategies fully support the vision of the organization. Finally, practitioners are expected to measure engagement efforts to demonstrate the effectiveness.

"I am an authentic representative"—Supporting the corporate vision.

As a senior-level executive for a healthcare organization, Michael has a dual role as organization and team leader. He says, "First, I have to understand the big-picture vision as a leader of [this organization], and then I have to understand as the leader of marketing and communications how my team and I can and should support that strategy."

Leslie coordinates the internal communication strategy for an organization of more than 30,000 employees and indicates that her first priority is "helping the organization," based on directives from leadership. She states, "We are going to start with leadership to understand their big picture you know, strategic needs and where we think we are doing a good job engaging our coworkers and talk to them about what is happening and where we have gaps." She says sometimes it is a matter of negotiating the needs of leadership and the needs of employees:

> When we do our strategic plans we are trying to think through what does the organization need us to do, what do coworkers need to hear, where are they going to be, how do we support them going through, and we try to take all of those pieces together . . . . It is more art than science, I have to say.

Practitioners must do more than capture the vision of organization leaders, Curtis explains; they must embrace the vision in order to adequately convey it to members of various stakeholder groups:

> I think engaging is a big, big part of what I am supposed to do. . . . I am an authentic representative of [the organization]. That I can speak not just articulately about the values and the goals and whatever the issues are, but also represent it as a genuine example of the brand values.

Shane agrees and says, "My role in engaging is to help hone [sic] in on the right people at the right time. And to make sure that I [am] able to convey the right message."

As an authentic representative of her organization and a senior public affairs specialist for a government agency, Amy said, over the years, her ability to engage on behalf of the city has been crucial:

> . . . I am the one who is [listed] on the list serves. I am the one who is managing the social media accounts. I am the one who is answering the emails. I am the one who gets the calls. You would be surprised how many phone calls I receive because people see my name on all the press releases and on top of just about every press release that has come out . . . for 12 years. My name, my email, my cell phone, my phone number, my blood type, my, so the people will come to me. . . . '[M]y neighbor's dog won't stop barking.' I just get it all and I respond regardless of the platform. . . . They come to me. I respond or I get them connected with someone . . . who can help them.

The obligation of practitioners during engagement efforts is to focus on what is in the best interest of the organization, Kristi insists. Using herself as an example, Kristi says she is responsible for knowing the direction in which the healthcare technology market is headed in order to engage her stakeholder groups – partners, clients, prospects, board members, and investors –appropriately. Half of the equation is reading the market on behalf of the organization, the other half is reading the stakeholders and keeping them "happy with our products and services, . . . mak[ing] sure that we are as a company and technology in the same place and that the messaging aligns." She states further:

> Engagement really is all about . . . messaging, getting the message to people, getting them to open the message, getting them to talk about the message, evolving the message, and then getting them to do what it is that we are trying to get them to do. Whether it be buy our technology, buy our services, whatever.

Beyond negotiating the needs of top management and employees, practitioners state trying to influence the corporate vision through engagement is a constant.

"Engagement was there."

Practitioners state listening and talking back and forth with stakeholders is an immediate indication that engagement is underway, and it is up to them to try to influence stakeholders to continue the process. For example, Sabrina, who works for a nonprofit athletic organization, stresses engagement is an opportunity to build partnerships and collaborations with stakeholder groups as they embrace the mission of the organization and decide which parts align with their values.

> I think the best type of engagement is when it is peripheral, where you are taking into consideration . . . your need but you are also endearing in making sure you are taking into consideration the other party's need, their question. [A]nd so I think optimal engagement is really around the peripheral, where you are considering different angles, you are processing information, you are asking questions, you are listening to feedback.

Anne, one of three communicators in the study to offer a marketer's perspective, says while engagement happens at varying degrees and levels, first knowing that stakeholders are open to hearing from the organization starts the process of helping the institution fulfill its mission:

> Most people think of engagement as you're talking back to me and you're letting me know what you think and we're having a two-way communication. [B]ut again . . . you could say I don't even want to get any messages from you. You could shut me down from the very beginning. I don't even get to that two-way communication. My goal is to just get you to be open to receiving a message . . . . I don't really want to assume that engagement doesn't start until I get some feedback from you.

Though practitioners strategize ways to engage stakeholders on behalf of the organization, they believe one of the challenges they face is demonstrating to organizational leaders' that engagement matters. However, to do that, they stress having to deliver results in a way that senior executives can clearly assess that the efforts are good for the organization.

"If we can measure it, we can manage it"—Measurement

Things mid-level practitioners in this study identified as successful engagement contradicted with what senior executives in the study deem successful. Included in this section are the differences identified from the interviews of both groups of professionals. Senior leaders explain success is by quantity, whereas the mid-level practitioners express success is sometimes more about quality.

As a general public relations practitioner, Amy says senior leadership is often very attached to the "traditional way we have measured engagement;" that is, counting or by the numbers. She goes on to explain that her organization's top leaders typically only understand engagement in terms of a "huge turnout at a community meeting . . . a lot of emails or phone calls," as well as positive results of satisfaction surveys, donors who have increased their giving, and increases in employee recruitment and retention numbers.

Leadership in Leslie's organization, where she is an internal communications manager, seems to care most about trying to assess how engaged employees are with the organization:

> They look a lot at that coworker satisfaction survey. . . . [T]hat is the tool that we use, and there are questions in there about coworker communications, there are questions in there about leadership engagement and all of that. . . . [T]hey look at those things and they come back to us if something is not looking like it should. They ask us to come up with a plan for how to address it.

John, who works for the federal government, provided a more-explicit example:

> I've had people [organization leaders] in my office tell me that, to them, successful engagement is increasing the number of followers we have on Facebook. Not even quality engagement, you know? So . . . they come to my office, they tell me, 'You email X, Y, or Z. Call X, Y, or Z and tell all of their folks to like our Facebook page.' They want to have likes on Facebook.

In a follow-up conversation, Shane, lead communication specialist, said, "If we can measure it, we can manage it. If we can manage it, we can get paid for it. You cannot manage anything that you cannot measure."

Social media used as a tool for engagement opens up another area of measurement possibilities for organizations to hang their hat on, says Curtis, a senior executive in higher education. While social media provides access to mass publics, Curtis said social media engagement also allows organizations to be "very targeted."

> There were a thousand followers, you know, 300 of whom are people who claim to be those we would really want to speak to. Alums or people [of] a certain

> demographic. . . . [E]ngagement today and social media allows you to be much more discreet and one-to-one . . . in a measurable way.

Additionally, using quantifiable measures to gauge organizational successes provides the participants an incentive. It is important for public relations practitioners to show the value of their work to the organization and to retain a "seat at the table" of high-level organization executives. Jill, senior executive in academic medicine, said she sometimes feels compelled to show the "growth" accomplished through her communication initiatives in the form of numbers. "Biannually I do a report and a presentation to our leadership team that shows measurement statistics about different engagement tools. I feel accountable to show growth or to be able to show a lack of engagement as a reason to maybe go a different path… in terms of our resources and our efforts."

Amy, senior public affair specialist, notes:

> I think for our leadership, they see . . . engagement [as] a lot of faces at public meetings . . . a lot of emails or a lot of phone calls; kind of the traditional way that we have measured engagement. For them, they are like, 'wow that is a lot', 'that is good there is a lot of people giving us feedback', 'that is a lot of interest that is awesome.'

She states quantitative approaches such as counting likes and follows on social media coupled with other quantitative measures like surveys help her agency assess how well they are meeting the needs of residents:

> We measure what we do [with] an annual resident satisfaction survey and we use the information from that survey . . . tailor what we are going to do . . . .We do it every year and we look at the results and we see, are you very satisfied, are you just satisfied, are you dissatisfied, are you very dissatisfied? Oh you are very dissatisfied we don't have enough swimming pools? Ok we are going to use this as we prepare our budgets to figure out can we afford to [add] a swimming pool . . . [W]e also ask communication questions in that survey. How do you get information from us? How do you want to get information from us? Do you follow us on social media? Do you get our newsletters because we are looking at are you happy with what we are doing [and] what can we do better?

Evidence from first cycle coding indicates participants believe there is not an array of choices beyond quantitative data to validate their successes and, for them, numerical metrics become the natural default – a knee-jerk response. For example, Najuma, who owns her own public relations agency, quickly responds that, in order to determine success, “You have to figure out exactly what you want out of engagement and set your metrics.”

Some senior-level executives in the study admit that numbers do, in fact, drive them even when evaluating the effectiveness of engagement. The numbers often tie back to the organization’s mission and goals. Kim, an executive who now works in higher education, recalls working in the private sector. “Let’s get real. . . . [E]ngagement, we can talk about that all day long but executive leadership ultimately wants to know what sales look like.” She said, however, organization leaders try to take a holistic view of how engagement affects the return on investment. “Engagement now equals dollars later because otherwise your business isn’t in business.”

Engagement can easily be quantified, according to Kristi, also a senior executive, when used to influence stakeholder action.

> If you look at . . . engagements in the tactical frame, how many people showed up to the webinar? How many people showed up to the conference? How many people downloaded this white paper that we just invested $5,000 in? How many people watch our video on YouTube? It is numbers. How many people in a session ask questions? How many people downloaded the presentations after the conference? It is numbers. How much time did you give me. I asked you for 8 hours, did you give me 8 hours. I am going to quantify that.

Kristi has worked in public relations for 14 years and says the field has struggled to measure engagement because it has mischaracterized the term to start:

> I think what we are trying to get to when we talk about engagement in larger categories is inclusion and . . . this whole tribal sense where you have people that feel connected to your brand, to your message, to . . . your initiative that you are doing. . . . [W]hat we are trying to get is that sense of connectedness, . . . the ‘I am part of something bigger.’ I don’t think that that is engagement. I think the tactic is engagement.

Once practitioners treat the term as a tactical approach, she adds, measuring it quantitatively will make more sense.

For senior executives in this study, having quantifiable measures associated with successful engagement can lead to profits for the organization's bottom line, but also top management. Executives say they are sometimes well compensated for meeting organizational goals. The best way to prove the goals have been met is numerical metrics. Michael, a healthcare executive, explains that this is not an uncommon practice for organizations, particularly in healthcare. Goals are revisited on a yearly basis to ensure leaders are hitting their mark.

> . . . [A]t a director level and above, we have incentive compensation that was tied to the outcome of not just that [patient satisfaction] metric but to a series of several metrics. So, it's real for us. It's not just data at which we take a look. It's data that we take a look at, that we're aware of, that we've goals decked against, and we've got dollars, our own personal dollars riding on this as well. So there are a number of reasons, a number of incentives for us to be focused on those metrics, not just from the patients' perspective, but also from our own perspective, and that [is] consistent with most healthcare organizations.

Sabrina, a 15-year communication strategist working for a nonprofit sports organization, recalls numbers were a priority for executives she worked with over the years:

> They cared about employee turnover and retention. So those were [the] drivers. Membership retention and attraction. So, again, more business outcomes. Are we attracting more members to the organization? Are we losing members? Customer satisfaction numbers. Are they up or down? So it was very metrics driven.

Figure 6.5. Quantifiable vs. Unquantifiable Engagement Measures

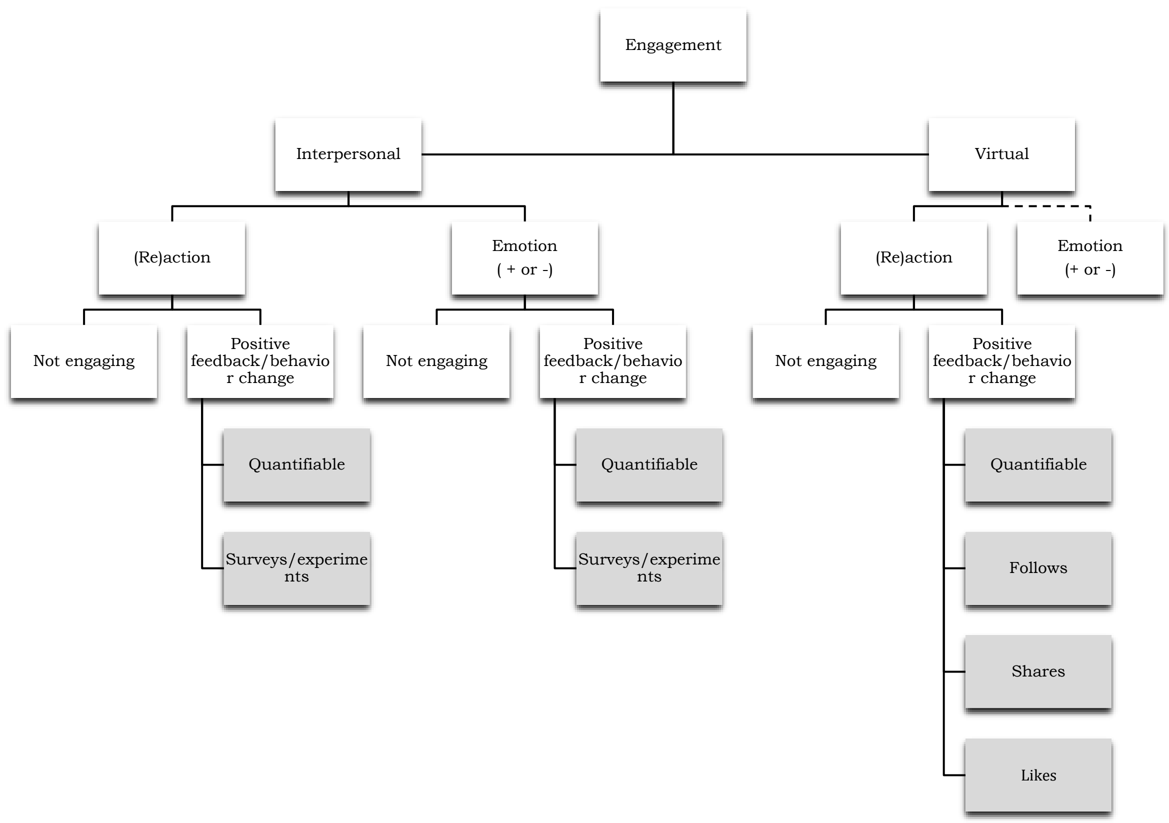


Figure 6.5. Quantifiable vs. Unquantifiable Engagement Measures. This model includes the quantifiable and unquantifiable properties of engagement.

Figure 6.5 adds another layer to the properties of the engagement model. Here, the diagram illustrates interpersonal and virtual engagements initiated by practitioners that trigger positive or negative emotions and/or (re)action responses from stakeholders. Feedback and behavior changes are traditionally measured quantitatively in order to satisfy preferences of top managers. For example, satisfaction surveys can capture the attitudes of employees and experiments can be used to measure stakeholder behavior changes. Virtual engagement is traditionally measured quantitatively by counting follows, shares, and likes.

Some mid-level practitioners disagree with current approaches to assess engagement because the results are not always helpful or meaningful. As a mid-career, senior public relations specialist for a local governmental agency, Stacy questions whether numbers demonstrate anything of value for the organization.

> . . . [W]e can say how many Facebook posts we did or Twitter posts we did . . . and I guess . . . some would define that as being interactive. We posted it, someone read it, but to some degree, how do we measure that interaction?... [T]o me, that is not necessarily where the big gains are made.

Not every senior executive in the study supports numerical metrics as the best way to capture successful engagements. Kim, a senior executive in higher education, says organizations might be placing emphasis on the wrong thing:

> . . .[W]hen I look at engagement I look at it more along the lines of the strength of the relationship. . . . I don't necessarily think . . . the number of times I engage with [constituents] as a brand. . . . [T]hat is not the high water mark . . . . What we are aiming for is quality.

She suggests practitioners find ways to strike a balance between the quantifiable and the unquantifiable.

> It is almost like an algorithm . . . between a relationship, between the quality, and between the quantity. . . . [T]o be able to say, ok, we have got strong engagement from this audience could mean something slightly different across different audiences just based on sort of the nature of the amount of time that those constituents have to extend or what is appropriate with the subject matter.

Engagement is a way to "foster relationships through citizenship," suggests Alli, a mid-career professional, which she also believes represents quality over quantity. Anne, a senior executive in marketing and external relations, explains that her industry is being challenged to move from measuring the quantity to quality of relationships. Moving forward, she says, engagement is going be more important than ever for her organization and maintaining their client base:

> We are much smaller than we used to be. Engagement is going to be more important for us. I mean the non-sales engagement. . . . It is like I was saying that [the] more non-tangible engagement like relationships, commitment to the organization, and all those things. We are also going to be able . . . to impact these with engagement. But how do you quantify that? That is really my challenge with that part.

While practitioners offered thoughts on engagement efforts that can be quantified, they were less able to provide ways to measure the strength of relationship or commitment to the organization.

Figure 6.6 visualizes how practitioners describe their duty to the organization. Respondents believe there are three set expectations that exist as part of their role as practitioner: 1) live the corporate vision, 2) implement engagement strategies, and 3) measure the effectiveness of those strategies. Once public relations professionals understand the organizational mandate(s), leadership expects it will be reflected in every engagement effort. However, as respondents express, the disconnection between what top management considers successful engagement and what they consider successful engagement can be problematic, leading them to “sort of read the tea leaves,” as Kim explains it. Practitioners, instead, opt to measure and provide results of successful engagement in the way that resonates best with senior leadership, which is to provide executives with quantifiable results.

Figure 6.6. Organization Expectation

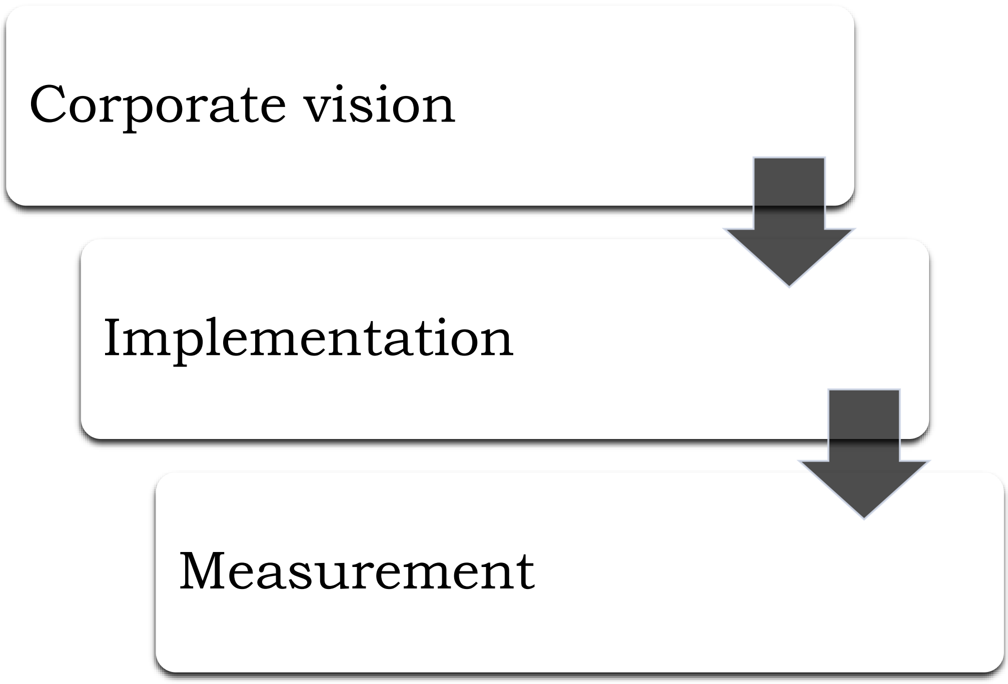


Figure 6.6. Organization Expectation. This illustrates what organizational leaders expect from practitioners.

The second practitioner duty that emerged from the data involves stakeholder expectation. It outlines not only expectations practitioners feel stakeholders have of them but also they specify their expectations of stakeholders.

Stakeholder Expectation

Fulfilling stakeholder expectations emerged from the interview data as a second important aspect of the practitioner's duty. This section outlines how communicators assess and weigh the needs of stakeholders against the needs of the organization, as well as how they meet and exceed stakeholders needs to create positive experiences that they will share with others. In this way, they fulfill their duty to the organization and to stakeholders.

It is based on a need.

By fully understanding and being able to articulate the vision of the company, respondents confirm that they are in position to help the organization fulfill its mission and goals, yet finding ways to meet the expectations of stakeholders is equally as important for them to consider. As Kristi, senior director of product marketing, explains, it comes down to practitioners recognizing the needs of stakeholders. “If you look at the seed of all engagement it is based on a need. You can wrap that seed in all kinds of delicious wants and cool stuff but when you really strip it down to bare essence, there is always need in engagement.” Practitioners believe they have to weigh the needs of stakeholders against the needs of the organization and find a common thread. Meeting the needs of stakeholders as a delicate balance, according to Steve, a senior executive in athletics communication. “ . . . [E]ngaging is a two-way conversation. . . . It is listening to those various audiences and some are internal . . . some are external . . . but it is a two-way street of communicating and processing information.”

> Najuma, who owns her own public relations agency, notes:
> . . . [Y]ou have to figure out what the other party needs, wants, and expects. That translates back to what you’re going to put out there to them to, hopefully, get them to engage back with you because if they’re not getting what they need, want, or expect they’re not going to engage.

After recognizing the needs of the stakeholders, respondents say they are creating an experience for stakeholders.

“Creating a reputation among people?”

Practitioners further describe engagement as the experiences members of stakeholder groups have with the organization and with other stakeholder member(s) with similar interests. Respondents believe stakeholders most appreciate these experiences when the organization meets or exceeds their expectations. Jill, associate dean and chief communications officer, suggests it is “creating a reputation among people.” In other words, organizations building experiences through engagements trigger shared emotional or reactionary responses that lead stakeholders “to car[e] about the organization” and its mission. “What brings people together?” Jill asked. “A common goal, a common passion, a common sense of responsibility.”

Stakeholder members become more engaged when they can communicate about shared moments they experienced with others. That is the point where the shared moments become “enhanced experiences,” as described by Shane, a healthcare communicator:

> So if . . . we both went to a concert. If we talk about that same concert afterwards, we had that moment where we're engaging about the concert afterwards. But if we both engage at the concert, if we both talk to each other at the concert, that's a point of engagement. But those are two completely separate—they're both still engagement, but . . . if you're at the concert talking to somebody, it changes that part of the experience.

He says it is in that moment when organizations have met or exceeded a held expectation that the experience changes. In a subsequent conversation, Shane states when stakeholders share their experience, they are connecting with the organization through that experience.

The most-meaningful engagements could also be the first moments of an experience with the organization, which Kim, senior director of development communication, explains are the “points of engagement” within an existing relationship between the stakeholder and the organization.

> If you are McDonalds, the first engagement is probably when you [stakeholder] were a kid and your parent took you there and you got to get chicken nuggets and the toy. . . . There are all sorts of different first engagements and then, as marketers and as communication strategists, we have got to tap into, ok, where did a powerful engagement happen? And how can we ensure that we are delivering more of that same expectation and fostering a desire by that constituent to want to return for more of that?

Additionally, she states the points of engagement with stakeholder groups are opportunities for practitioners to engage further. Michael refers to this series of positive engagements as a “bundled set of experiences” that might cause stakeholder members to readily want to engage with the organization.

In addition to their work experiences, respondents also were asked to talk about their personal experiences as stakeholders. Drawing from one of those personal experiences, Michael describes how a car company exceeded his expectations as a consumer. While on the road traveling, he took his vehicle to unfamiliar dealership to be serviced:

> They brought us [he and his wife] inside, made us comfortable, invited us to grab a cup of Starbucks while they put oil in the car. . . . [A] half an hour later, not only had they topped off the oil, they washed my car and brought it back around to me and said, ‘you know, we noticed that you had a little dirt on the car. It's a beautiful day and we just didn't want you to drive around in a dirty car so we cleaned it. We hope that's okay.’ Delighting me beyond my expectations. That's what Porsche does to engage me as a consumer.

He notes the experience and a collection of other positive emotional experiences consistently met his expectations as a customer and kept him feeling valued as a stakeholder of the car company. As a result, he points out that he is now a brand loyalist who evangelizes on behalf of the organization. “I tell people about my experiences . . . I engage by talking positively about them [car company].” Furthermore, he believes he embodies the spirit of the organization. “When I first became . . . a . . . consumer, I did buy a black baseball cap that has got the . . . insignia on it . . . so every now and then I may put the cap on and wear it if I feel like a [brand] driver that day or something like that.”

Steve describes a favorite restaurant he and his family attend and, speaking from a stakeholder’s perspective, describes what he expects from the company:

> . . . it is about that two-way communication. When I walk into a Moe’s or a restaurant and they see me and they look up and they say hello and I say hello

> back. … I don't know the people behind the counter, they don't know me, but I can tell if there is a sense of appreciation that I am there and if I feel like it is fake or forced, I just don't have that same passion for coming back the next time.

He goes on to say:

> I think . . . engagement has to be honest [and] there has to be some faith in that both parties are getting something positive out of this and if the engagement is fake or false or phony, I think I [can] pick up on that and it bothers me and it changes the way I engage back.

Lisa was more conflicted in describing her expectations as a consumer and her role as a practitioner:

> It would not bother me if [the organization] initiated engagement by letting me know that they are there. Like . . . if I got a coupon . . . that wouldn't bother me. Now if they then continued to let me know . . . that would bother me. So I think in this case, I would want [engagement] to be more on my terms although I wouldn't mind them saying, 'hi, we are here, come check us out.' But beyond that, I wouldn't want to be flooded with information from them. … [A]s a consumer it seems like I . . . would rather be left alone until I feel like making the choice to be engaged. As a practitioner, I have the mindset I need to get in front of this person otherwise they are not going to be engaged.

Figure 6.7. Stakeholder Shared Experiences

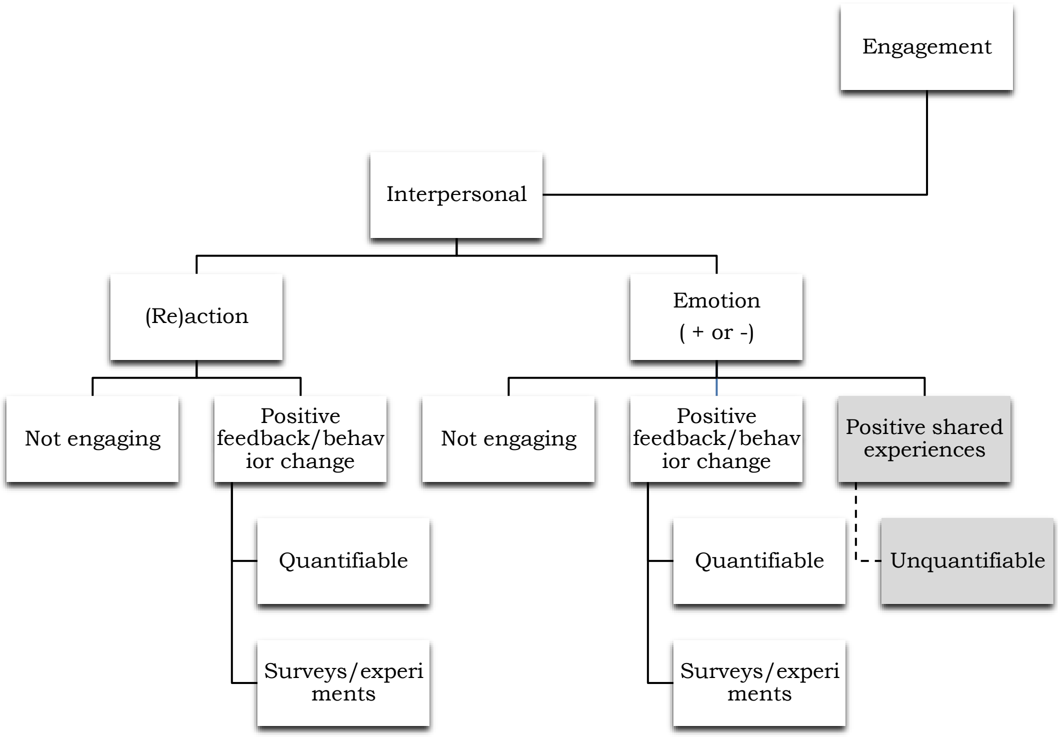


Figure 6.7. Stakeholder Shared Experiences. This illustrates where the stakeholders' shared experiences are located on the engagement model.

Figure 6.7 includes a visual representation of interpersonal engagement that triggers a positive emotion. The positive emotion can lead to the stakeholders' sense of shared experiences. However, practitioners do not suggest how or if shared experiences can be measured. Therefore, the diagram indicates these experiences are unquantifiable signified by a dotted line.

Practitioners suggest stakeholders are looking for them to meet and/or exceed their expectations of the organization. As such, practitioners discussed creating "points of engagement" or moments when stakeholders feel their needs have been fulfilled and it keeps them coming back for more experiences. They acknowledge in doing so, respondents say they expect something in return from stakeholders.

Practitioner's expectation of stakeholders —"They have a responsibility to . . . put forth some effort."

Producing evangelists out of stakeholders through engagement efforts to help build up the organization's reputation is something respondents see as a function of their job responsibilities in order to meet the organization's expectations. While attempting to also meet the needs of various stakeholder groups, practitioners are divided on the stakeholder member's role in engaging. "I don't think they are totally off the hook," says Lisa, who owns her own public relations agency, adding that practitioners can put the information in front of them but the stakeholder's role is equally important for a successful engagement to occur. She explains:

> . . . [W]e can send them emails or put on conference calls or put on events until we are blue in the face but if they are not willing to pick up the phone or read the email or come to the event then there is only so much we can do. . . . [T]hey definitely have a responsibility to . . . also put forth some effort.

She also says, "It is kind of like a teacher and a student. The teacher can give you all the information in the most-interesting way possible, but if the student is not willing to absorb it or study it or learn it then there is going to be no positive outcome." Alli, social media employee and engagement specialist, agrees and says that stakeholder's have a responsibility to "be present, to be there, to be willing to receive whatever [is being put] out."

Practitioners also believe stakeholders should provide ongoing feedback. Kristi, senior executive for a healthcare technology firm, says she needs stakeholders to "continue to tell me what they need, what is working for them and what is not working for them, and use what we offer them."

From an internal communication perspective, Leslie, healthcare communicator says, "I do think that it is the responsibility of every coworker . . . to at least open an email, to at least hear about what is going on, to make an attempt to be a part of things that are happening. . . . [Y]ou do have a responsibility for paying attention and to know what is happening around you."

However, Amy, city communication specialist, says the onus falls on the practitioners' shoulders:

> It would be great to see stakeholders take more initiative. . . . [P]eople just don't. I think they are just living their lives and . . . the bar is high on practitioners to get . . . in front of people . . . particularly as social media has flourished. . . . [P]eople are less inclined to do their own research or . . . take that initiative. They are used to it being fed to them.

Some practitioners believe there should be a balance between stakeholders and practitioners for effective engagement. Kim, a communicator for a large nonprofit organization, provides this example:

> . . . [I]t is like if you are at a cocktail party, what is the role of the guests? Well . . . you would hope that they would be friendly. You would hope that they wouldn't get sloppy drunk, you would hope that they wouldn't like spatter off things and be rude and reckless with the home. . . . [O]n some level, that is what you would expect out of your participants in this sort of metaphorical engagement-like scenario, and [in reality] they don't have to do that, though. They can act and be however they want to; it just doesn't mean that we need to counter that with the same type of behavior.

Engagement can be considered a shared responsibility, says Najuma, who owns her public relations agency. "It's our job as communicators to put something out there that makes you want to engage." However, she adds, "ultimately it's the consumers' responsibility . . . to actual[ly] . . . act." Anne, marketing executive for an insurance agency, also believes in being proactive. She explains, in terms of making a sale with a client:

> My most-important role is to start the conversation so they want to keep engaging with us…. I am always really thinking about our first impression, our first engagement with you, and our first message. That is really where I see my role.

There is consensus among participants that engagement relates to both one-way and two-way communication between the organization and stakeholder group in exchange for something such as shared experiences or feedback that will help grow and/or improve the relationship between parties. There's no guarantee, however, that their efforts will be effective. For example, Jessica, a senior public information officer who works for a law enforcement agency, says getting the public to engage with their messages sometimes fall flat. She maintains that the public has to be open and willing to connect to any given engagement effort.

> You know, you can sometimes I get disappointed because . . . there are things that we will post or information that we will share and I will be like, 'yeah, people should really care about this', and sometimes they don't. Sometimes it doesn't rally them. Sometimes it doesn't convince them to take an active stance or to be motivated . . . so . . . it is about their obligation or their duty is to stay connected.

Practitioners believe stakeholders share in the responsibility to be engaged, which is why it is important for the organization value relationship development with stakeholders.

"Engagement lives within a relationship."

Respondents believe engagement is connected to the organization's ability to establish relationships with its stakeholder groups. Data reveal that practitioners believe effectively meeting the stakeholders' expectations leaves a door open for establishing a lasting relationship. From an internal communication perspective, Leslie says that is what she tries to accomplish with her engagement efforts with employees in her organization. Engagement is more than getting employees to feel a sense of attachment to the organization. "I think people do have a very personal; they have a relationship with this organization. A lot of people have been here for a really long time. I think that whenever you are trying to open the door to having people talk to you, share feedback, having this two-way conversation, you are trying to build a more-intimate relationship."

As a Community Engagement Manager in city government, Juan Carlos says his position is to help the organization improve relations with the community who uses the city's services. He agrees with Leslie that establishing relationships through engagement is not an immediate outcome and takes work.

> We create a relationship with the community that evolves through time, so the longer we have that relationship, the more things we go through, the more we establish that we can be trusted, things like that. The relationship evolves, becomes stronger . . . . [E]ngagement lives within a relationship. When we engage the community, we are not just thinking of what we can offer the community, but we are also trying to gather input and get the community to participate and give us feedback.

The feedback helps these practitioners identify additional ways to meet stakeholder expectations. It also starts the back and forth of two-way communication between the parties that can lead to distinct engagements. Juan Carlos offers the following image of how engagement connects to relationships:

> . . . [I]t is like the universe and the planets, so we have the relationship being a broad type of engagement and a specific engagement that we do – because… the word engagement can also … have different definitions based on if we are talking just about the meaning of a word or if we are talking about applied to a specific field or topic or situational. So, in this case, we have relationships as a wider umbrella, as the universe, and the engagement that we do as one of the planets. So, that is what I meant when I said that engagement lives in the relationship because it is a type of relationship [that's] more specific. It is narrowing down the relationships to that engagement.

Describing engagement's connection to relationships, however, is complex. "Relationships, I think, come with products you engage with all the time and brands people know like household names," said Anne, senior executive communicator. She believes, while not considered a relationship, being exposed to the organization is a type of engagement that should not be ignored. "Relationship is great, but that is like a luxury I rarely get."

Lisa recalls trying to develop relationship strategies through engagement in her former position as director of communications. She explains those member organizations that were engaged were the ones who valued her company and wanted to retain membership. Their membership was more than in name only.

> There are some people who are members who don't even know it. . . . [T]heir payroll department probably just pays the dues every year and they are not really . . . paying attention or interacting. They are not engaged at all. So the relationship, I mean, in that instance, would be barely existing. So someone who has, who is engaging more, I feel like their relationship would have more impact on both . . . members and on us as an organization.

Even so, she struggles to explain how engagement and relationship are connected. "It is like what comes first though the chicken or the egg? If somebody is engaged, then your relationship is going to become closer, but if your relationship is closer, then maybe they will be more apt to be more engaged. I don't know."

Some respondents clearly state they feel the relationships established between the organization and stakeholders through engagement set the stage for new conversations and new engagements to occur. For example, Shane, communication specialist in healthcare, compares relationships to a bridge, and, "engagement is really what keeps up that bridge. Those are the pillars." Organizations create "enhanced experiences" for stakeholders through engagement. These experiences, or what Shane calls "points of engagement," are what help to not only build but also maintain relationships between parties.

"I am not sure there is anything that we do that isn't based on relationships," explains Steve, athletics communications strategist. "There has to be engagement before you can have a relationship. . . . I don't know if you can get a fully mature relationship with someone before you have engagement. I think there needs to be some level of engagement." Steve indicates that the level of engagement would differ with the stakeholder group. For example, the level of engagement with student athletes would differ from engagement with coaches from engagement with the sports reporters going from a more intimate, concentrated effort, to one of fulfilling needs through information dissemination.

Levels of engagement.

Practitioners state the levels of engagement help to address stakeholders based on their shared experiences with the organization. While, participants believe the connection between engagement and relationship is complex, they had clear descriptions in their minds of the “levels of engagement.” Specifically, more than half of respondents agree they have to consider which level of engagement applies to their stakeholder and/or situation. Specifically, participants designate the lowest level of engagement with terms like “superficial,” “surface,” or simply “low level.” For example, as Leslie, internal communications manager, explains:

> To me, a relationship is something that you build towards. You can engage with someone and just . . . have a conversation, keep it very . . . surface, and there are a lot of things that we do in internal comm[sic] that are just surface. . . . [T]he business has to run.

Some engagement lacks meaning, says Shane, lead communication specialist:

> If I walk by somebody and somebody just says, hey, how's it going? You know, and I was like, uh, good. They're not actually asking for my whole day's summary of my feelings . . . so that's a very superficial engagement. They're still at least reaching out to saying hello to some degree with a response coming back. That's engagement—not meaningful though.

Jill believes that stakeholders, in her case, employees, can be “engaged at a very superficial level. “So, you’ve got some people [who] know a little bit about what’s going on [in the organization]. I read the newsletter every now and then, feel like I’ve got a good handle on the important things.” On the other hand, at the highest level of engagement, stakeholders are motivated, excited, and actively involved with the organization. As Jill explains:

> You’ve got the people who are like, ‘ask me anything. Ask me anything. I know everything. Give me a quiz because I know everything that’s going on with this organization.’ . . . You’d love for everybody to be involved at that highly-engaged

> level. But I think that's probably unrealistic. So, you want there to be some level of engagement with all of your targeted audiences. And your goal, as I said, because it's never-ending, is to continually make sure that you're nurturing those engagements so that the people that have fallen off come back in. And the people that are not highly engaged continue to increase their engagement.

The ebb and flow of engagement that Jill refers to complements Kim's view of engagement being on a continuum:

> . . . [G]etting somebody to like a social post is an engagement. Getting somebody to give you or to donate . . . 10 million dollars . . . or to spend 8 bucks on a sandwich instead of 4 bucks on a sandwich. I mean those are all engagements, too. But . . . they exist on a continuum of what is my time investment as a consumer. It takes me zero investment of interest or effort to like something on Facebook or Twitter . . . . [I]t takes an immense more amount of engagement to actually participate at what we will call the point of purchase.

Leslie takes a different approach in her explanation, which is in line with what Michael, senior vice president of marketing and communications, points out, "one size [of engagement] does not fit all." She sketches an inverted pyramid and labels the levels according to high and low levels of engagement. She then assigns the tactics to each level. She explains that these are the levels and tactics she and organization leadership consider to engage employees.

> . . . I see it this way. This is your level 1, which is just the surface level engagement. Then you have a level 2 . . . [w]here, you know, this is like a coworker forum, . . . where you are getting out in front of people, you are taking it one step further. This level 1 is like our newsletters, . . . the stuff we are pushing to people that we are trying to get them to know. Then we are taking this second level, we are actually going to go out and we want . . . this two-way thing to happen. . . . [R]elationship to me is like more of this two-way thing. . . . This has value from an organizational standpoint.

Interestingly, Leslie does not believe she has the responsibility as internal communications manager to move employees past Level 1:

> Do I think that we have to get all coworkers to relationship level? Probably not. . . . [T]his relies on leaders and coworkers being open to a deeper connection. . . . You can start to build but I don't think that is necessarily a corporate or organizational function. . . . I don't necessarily feel like, as an internal comm person, my job is to grow personal relationships with people. I think that I create the opportunity for people to engage enough that they start to feel part of

> an organization and that is part of the organic process where they would deeper dive with people.

> Lisa, business owner and public relations specialist, provides this example:

> So on a very basic level [the question] would be, has this person or organization even become a member of our organization? That would be, like, barely any engagement, [it] would be like, hey, they have joined us – yay. And then, like, a next level would be they are participating in all of our events, they are participating in our conference calls, they are asking us questions, they are trying to find information. I suppose a next level of engagement would be they are becoming part of the leadership of the organization, they are joining the board, they are volunteering their time.

In summary, practitioners believe there are different levels of engagement that are applied depending on the desired outcome and how engaged they want stakeholders to be, as well as the different tactics employed, which depends on the desired level of relationship. Understandably, as Michael and Steve put it, one size does not fit all.

Figure 6.8 shows a continuum of engagement that can occur between the organization and the stakeholder. The continuum represents engagement from the highest level to lowest level as described by the participants. In order to engage stakeholder groups, practitioners determine whether the engagement will include interpersonal or intimate components. The solid arrow that leads from the "organization" to "high-level engagement" demonstrates the practitioner's intent. High-level engagement can occur through back-and-forth and two-way forms of communication or whether it will include superficial elements that generally occur through one-way communication efforts. If engaging stakeholder groups with low-level engagement, practitioners then determine whether the engagement will include superficial components. The solid arrow that leads from the "organization" to "low-level engagement" demonstrates the practitioner's intent in that instance.

The left half of the continuum represents efforts by the organization to influence engagement. For example, if practitioners' engagement efforts will include intimate elements, they may employ town hall meetings for the community or employee forums for internal organizational stakeholders. The solid arrow that leads from "high-level engagement" to "stakeholder" illustrates that the effort is to influence stakeholders. On the other hand, if practitioners are mainly concerned with information dissemination, their efforts will be on the lower end of the continuum and include reach for social media or a press release. The goal can be to raise awareness. The right half of the continuum represents how stakeholders are influenced by the engagement. For instance, if engagement is simply to raise awareness of stakeholders, practitioners might be concerned with reach or sending a newsletter. The solid arrow that leads from "low-level engagement" to "stakeholder" demonstrates that the effort is to influence stakeholders.

The middle section of the continuum indicates that social media can serve as one-way communication vehicle used by the organization to push information to stakeholders. It sets in the middle of the continuum because practitioners are currently using social media as a one-way tool; however, as practitioners have hinted, they are looking for more meaningful ways to use virtual engagements. Additionally, arrows pointing from "Twitter posts" and "Facebook posts" in the direction of "stakeholder" represent that effort, whereas stakeholders can provide feedback with follows, shares, and likes. Arrows pointing from the stakeholder's response toward "organization" represent this.

While the organization expects practitioners to understand the corporate vision and the relationship the organization has with stakeholders, these communicators also have certain expectations of themselves.

Figure 6.8. High-Low Level Engagement Continuum

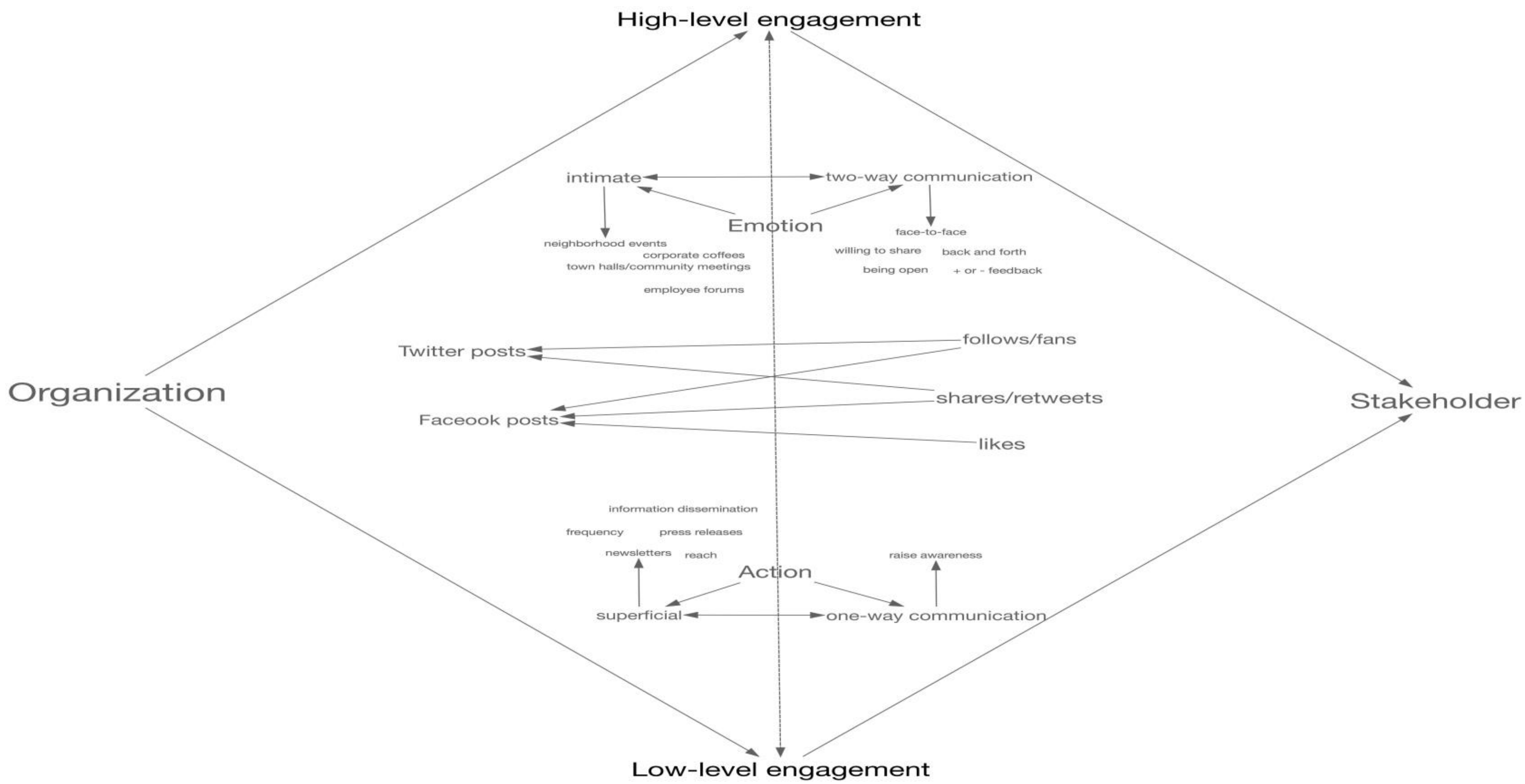


Figure 6.8. High-Low Level Engagement Continuum. This includes the continuum of high and low levels of engagement between organizations and stakeholders.

Self-expectation.

While practitioners are aware of the organizational expectations placed on them to facilitate engagement, there is an amount of expectation they also place on themselves. They set a high bar in how they describe themselves.

"We have a high standard for us."

It is evident that these practitioners want to excel. As Juan Carlos notes, "More than just collecting data and trying to interpret [it], I prefer to be in the middle of it observing and asking questions sometimes and making sure that we are truly doing the best we can." For example, practitioners see one of their duties is as the engagement facilitator for the organization with stakeholders. One way to facilitate this is through crafting messaging that "gets in front of" stakeholders and "piques their interest." According to Amy, senior public affairs specialist, the messages must be, "composed in a way and put in front of them [stakeholders] in a way that they are like, 'oh, that is important, I am going to look into that, I am going to do something with that, I am going to respond, or I am going to share, or I am going to comment.'"

They put their skills to the best use possible to ensure the organization-to-stakeholder relationship remains strong. Amy, senior communication specialist, feels there is a certain amount of guesswork involved, however:

> We have a high standard for us. We have to get in front of [stakeholders] and we have to get in front of [stakeholders] on the platform of [their] choice and have it written in a way that it answers the 'so what' question for [them].

This expertise also involves "determin[ing] what type of [stakeholder] group gets what kind of engagement from my office," according to Steve, a senior executive in sports communication, who explains:

> I think part of my job is to kind of manage those . . . different types of engagement . . . . Is this [an] announcement? Is it press conference worthy? Is it press release worthy? Is it social media worthy? Is it all of the above?...We

> announce things all the time and many of them are done in different ways and part of my job is to determine, ok which things rise to what level?

Leslie, internal communications manager, says, “I feel like I serve as a bridge and a translator sometimes because I have to understand where these people [organization leaders and coworkers] are and what their priorities are…. [I]t is also a little bit of traffic cop.” Some of those decision-making responsibilities, as Jill describes, are part of strategizing. “My role is one, strategy. Target audience [and then determine] how to engage. Then once you figure out how to engage, creating the tool, creating the message, disseminating, and then trying to measure the level of engagement.” These activities all involve attending to stakeholder wants and needs through effective listening.

“Show you have listened, you care.”

Participants discuss listening as an important component of engagement. Because participants consider themselves to be a bridge between understanding what the organization requires of them and how to fulfill the needs of the stakeholder, Cynthia says one of the best ways to capture both is through good listening. “We do our best to make sure that people have a venue to be able to tell us [what they want to see happen].” She indicates that the venues or platforms, change depending on the stakeholders. “We [listen] in surveys . . . we will walk the neighborhood, pass out fliers, we will listen.” Study participants felt they, as Alli states, must “ . . . show you have listened, you care” about stakeholders beyond disseminating organizational messaging.

Figure 6.9 displays the self-expectations that practitioners experience. They describe themselves as a bridge between the needs of the organization and the needs of stakeholders. The left side of the model shows practitioners expect and are expected to understand and to realize the organization’s vision through engagement efforts. In order to implement the vision, communicators must start the conversation with stakeholders and maintain those efforts through listening to show that they, as representatives of the organization, care. This is illustrated by elements shown in the right side of the model. The work of the practitioner to serve as a bridge also crisscrosses planes. In order for them to help stakeholders understand the organization's vision, they must employ good listening skills when/if stakeholders provide feedback. Finally, sometimes the first step in implementing the vision of the organization is to start the conversation.

Figure 6.9 Practitioner Self-expectation

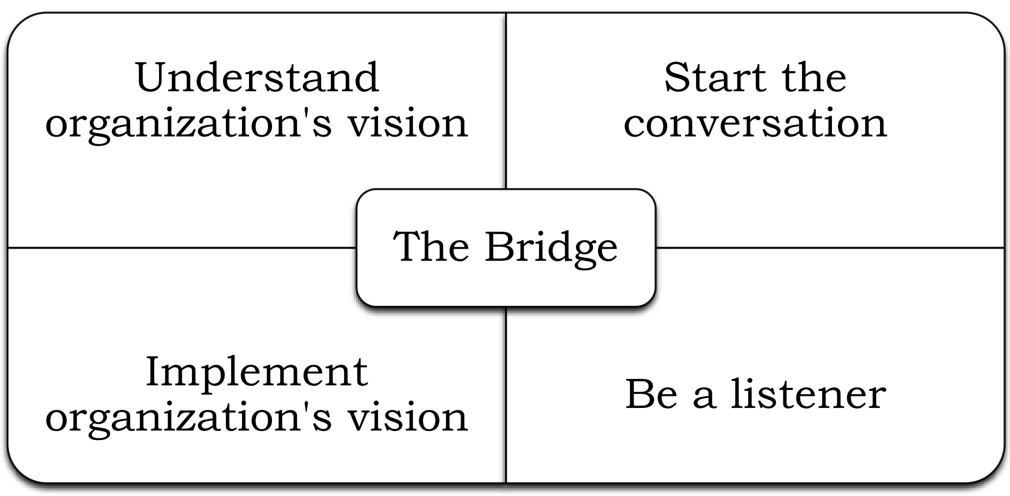


Figure 6.9. Practitioner Self-expectation. This illustrates the expectations practitioners place on themselves.

As noted previously, engagement efforts reinforce the work professionals already perform according to the expectations of the organization. As such, it is important to capture a list of engagement efforts practitioners employ and the ways in which they attempt to measure engagement successes (see Table 6.1). Juan Carlos, community engagement manager, admits that some of what he considers to be successful engagement is subjective. He explains, “I do not know exactly how they [organization leaders] define success, but they look at me for that . . . as in, I am the one that is going to the community and researching the findings and evaluating the results of every campaign or every change. . . .” Stacy notes:

> . . . is engagement 100 people attending these meetings? It might be a measurement but is that engagement? And depending on what your school of thought is, it may or may not be, and I don’t know that, because there is not that foundation there is that common base that is just kind of difficult to speak to. . . . [T]o me, engagement is, again, motivating an attendant or some attendants to be more supportive in tangible ways of the department’s goals.

Table 6 provides a listing of ways practitioners describe “doing” engagement. Nearly every practitioner uses some aspect of interpersonal engagement whether it is through public meetings, community walks, or employee forums. It is predominantly seen among those practitioners who work with internal audiences or with the community where they expect more-intimate relationships to occur. Practitioners with more focus on external stakeholders focus more heavily on social media tactics. More than half of practitioners explicitly state they use social media as a tool for engagement with data analytics being the most common way it is measured.

Additionally, some practitioners use research—in particular, surveys—as both tactics to engage and a popular way to measure engagement with both internal and external stakeholder groups. Quantitative measurement tools also include market research, attendance, and media clip counts. These practitioners also identify non-qualitative assessments such as anecdotes, word of mouth, and changes in behaviors.

Table 6.1

Engagement Efforts by Participant

Name	Title	Organizational area	Tactics	Measurement efforts
Alli	Social Media Employee & Engagement Specialist	Employee Relations	Social media training, surveys	Data analytics, surveys
Amy	Senior Public Affairs Specialist	External Relations	Social media, newsletter, email, face-to-face, memos	Marketing research, data analytics, headcount
Anne	Vice President Marketing and External Relations	External Relations	Print ads, trade shows, email, phone calls	Continuous contact, number of sales
Autumn	Public Relations Manager	External Relations	Media relations	Counting media clips
Curtis	Vice Chancellor of Communications	Internal/External	Social media, face-to-face, events, meetings	Head count, data analytics
Cynthia	Public Affairs Specialist	Internal/External	Surveys, community walks, fliers, public meetings, social media	Surveys, positive feedback, media coverage
Jessica	Senior Public Information Officer	External Relations	Media relations, social media	Data analytics
Jill	Associate Dean and Chief Communications Officer	Internal/External	Face-to-face, town hall meetings, surveys, blogs, emails	Surveys, headcount, statistics, word of mouth, biannual reports, formal presentations
John	Public Affairs Officer	External Relations	Media relations	Data analytics, media coverage
Juan Carlos	Community Engagement Manager	Community Relations	Face-to-face, printed materials, PSAs, social media	Data analytics
Kim	Senior Director, Development Communications	Development	Conversations initiated through the website, social media	Data analytics

Table 6.1

Engagement Efforts by Participant (cont.)

Name	Title	Organizational area	Tactics	Measurement efforts
Kristi	Senior Director Product Marketing	External Relations	Webinar, email, retreats, meetings	Marketing research, data analytics
Leslie	System Manager, Internal Communications	Employee Relations	Employee newsletter, forums (face-to-face), surveys	Anecdotal evidence, data analytics, surveys
Lisa	Owner	External Relations	Social media, emails, blog, face-to-face	Policy changes, membership increases
Michael	Senior Vice President Marketing & Communications	Internal/External	Face-to-face, word of mouth, surveys, written communication, social media	Anecdotal evidence, surveys, data analytics
Najuma	President/Owner	External Relations	Media relations	Anecdotal, data analytics
Sabrina	Director of Strategic Communications	Internal/External	Face-to-face, phone conversations	Anecdotal evidence, data analytics
Shane	Lead Communication Specialist	Internal/External	Face-to-face, email, website	Behavior modifications, surveys
Stacy	Senior Public Affairs Specialist	Community Relations	Classes, community events, awareness training, meetings, email, social media	Behavior modifications, surveys
Steve	Senior Associate Director of Athletics for Strategic Communications	External Relations	Social media, face-to-face	Data analytics, attendance

In summary, this section addressed three areas of practitioner duty: 1) organization expectation, 2), stakeholder expectation, and 3) self-expectation. The first area demonstrates the practitioner’s duty based on how and what they perceive the organization leaders expect of them. Next, as the broker between the organization and its stakeholders, communicators are expected to meet and fulfill the needs of both parties. However, practitioners expressed that stakeholders are not off the hook. There are stakeholder expectations that must be met in order for engagement efforts to be effective. Finally, there is a self-expectation as their professional role continues to evolve. All of the elements of practitioner duty are visualized in Figure 6.10. Practitioner duty is at the center of the practitioner's professional role, depicted in the inverted triangle. They often experience an internal as well as external pull as they attempt to fulfill the needs of the organization and stakeholder groups.

Figure 6.10. Practitioner Duty

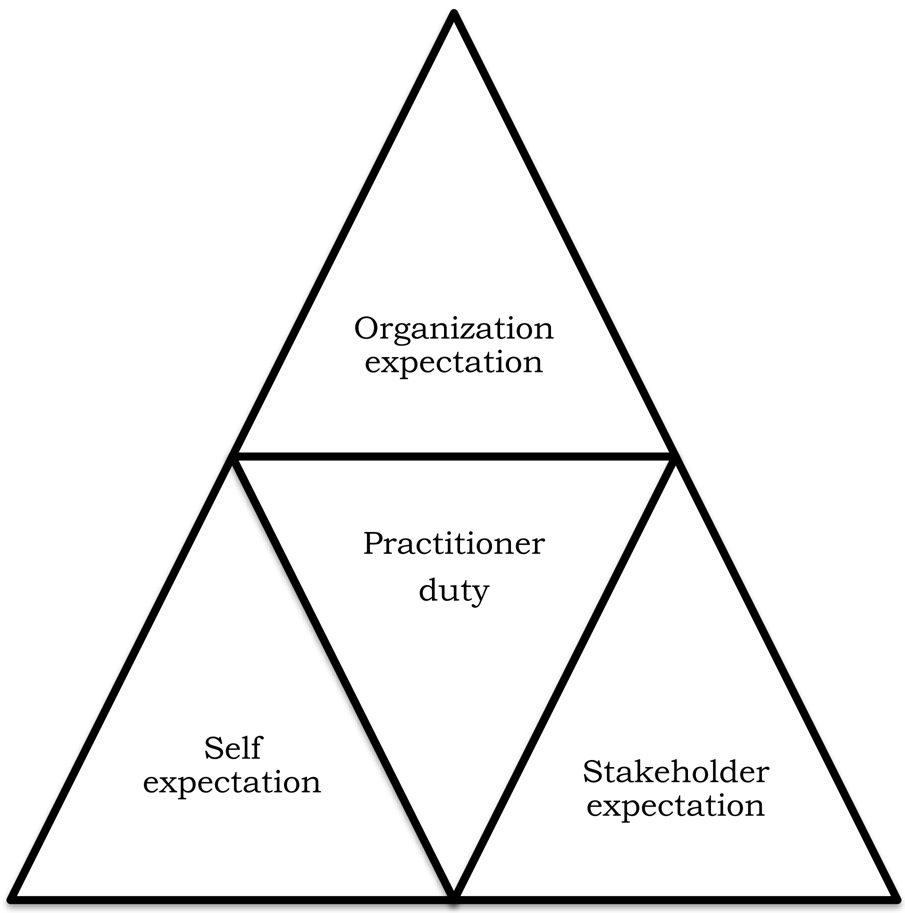


Figure 6.10. Practitioner Duty. This provides a visualization of the three areas of expectation that practitioners experience.

Stakeholder-driven Engagement

Finally, much of the interview data focused on organization attempts to influence positive engagements with stakeholders. Interestingly, some respondents chose not to discuss negative engagements precipitated by the stakeholder and the impact of those engagements on the organization. The reasons why are unclear; however, assumptions could be made that, 1) communicators felt time constrained and such a conversation would have prolonged the interview, 2) professionals felt the topic would have been out of the scope of the requested interview, 3) practitioners did not want to say anything during the interview that could be viewed as disparaging their organization, or 4) respondents may not have been comfortable addressing stakeholder-driven negative engagements and thus wanted to maintain some control over the flow of the interview. That said, the topic briefly came up with a few participants; therefore, I want to focus the last section of this chapter on their responses. Practitioners view negative engagement could be “irrational,” or a general distraction that clouds their efforts to get out the organization’s message. In most instances the organization’s goal is not to send negative messages or act negatively towards stakeholders – the people they want to influence.

Kim, for instance, states:

> Well, . . . I am going to stay on engagement as a positive thing because I think we could sort of . . . have a moment to sort of geek out on engagement where it is not positive . . . . I prefer to not go there because it is somewhat irrational at times . . . . So, I don’t mean to say that . . . negative engagement is always irrational. Sometimes it is very rational and it is very legitimate but it is a different type of thing altogether. So we will stay on positive engagement.

Steve, on the other hand, says it was not uncommon to encounter negative stakeholder-driven engagements, especially as a sports communicator. He notes that people often have opinions – positive or negative –about the team, his office, and the organization as a whole. Steve says he weighs his options before deciding whether to address an instance of negativity, particularly if it occurs online. Social media has made access to organizations much easier for stakeholders to express positive and negative attitudes about the organization. Steve believes the newfound freedom has had a direct impact on how practitioners perform their jobs. “There are lots of ways for people to engage with us [the organization] whether you are one of our constituents or not and . . . there ha[ve] to be people that can analyze that.” He says he weeds out engagement he considers “noise” or unhelpful to the organization’s decision-making processes.

> I don’t mean weed out the negative engagement. You are going to hear from people that you are doing something wrong and just because it is a negative [comment] doesn’t mean you ignore it. But there are times if somebody in California who just happens to like college athletics wants to weigh in on what is going on [here], well I am not sure they are informed enough for us to take that feedback and act on it. That may be engagement that we have to say ok thanks for getting back to us and we move on.

There are times, however, when the noise, as unhelpful as it may seem, should be acknowledged and addressed by the organization. If not, the organization can risk severe negative consequences led by stakeholders. Admittedly, there is noise in the form of online “trolls” and then there are orchestrated attempts by stakeholders to leverage changes in corporate practices. Jessica says she experienced something similar:

> . . . one of the things that I have had to deal with last year and continue to as part of crisis management for the agency, you know, protecting the brand and protecting the agencies reputation, is dealing with I wouldn’t say highly orchestrated, but definitely organized activist groups. …[A]nd so the way I would engage them would be a little bit differently. They would get a little bit different approach from me then I would say somebody with a general inquiry.

Jessica’s response to stakeholder-driven negative engagement is greater than what is required for “noise.” Her comment suggests there are different levels of stakeholder-driven negative engagements that impact the organization differently and require practitioners to address these engagements with different levels of responses.

Similar to the emotion-(re)action model, practitioners can choose not to engage with stakeholder “noise” or provide positive feedback. On the other hand, a more-intense negative engagement by stakeholders, such as in-person or virtual protest, may require practitioners to employ issues or crisis management strategies. As noted in Figure 6.11, negative engagements may be driven by the stakeholder’s emotional or (re)action response to the organization’s interpersonal or virtual engagement efforts.

Instead of non-engagement or a positive (re)action or emotion being triggered, an additional category, “negative feedback/behavior,” was added to the model to account for negative engagements led by stakeholders.

Figure 6.11. Stakeholder-driven Engagement

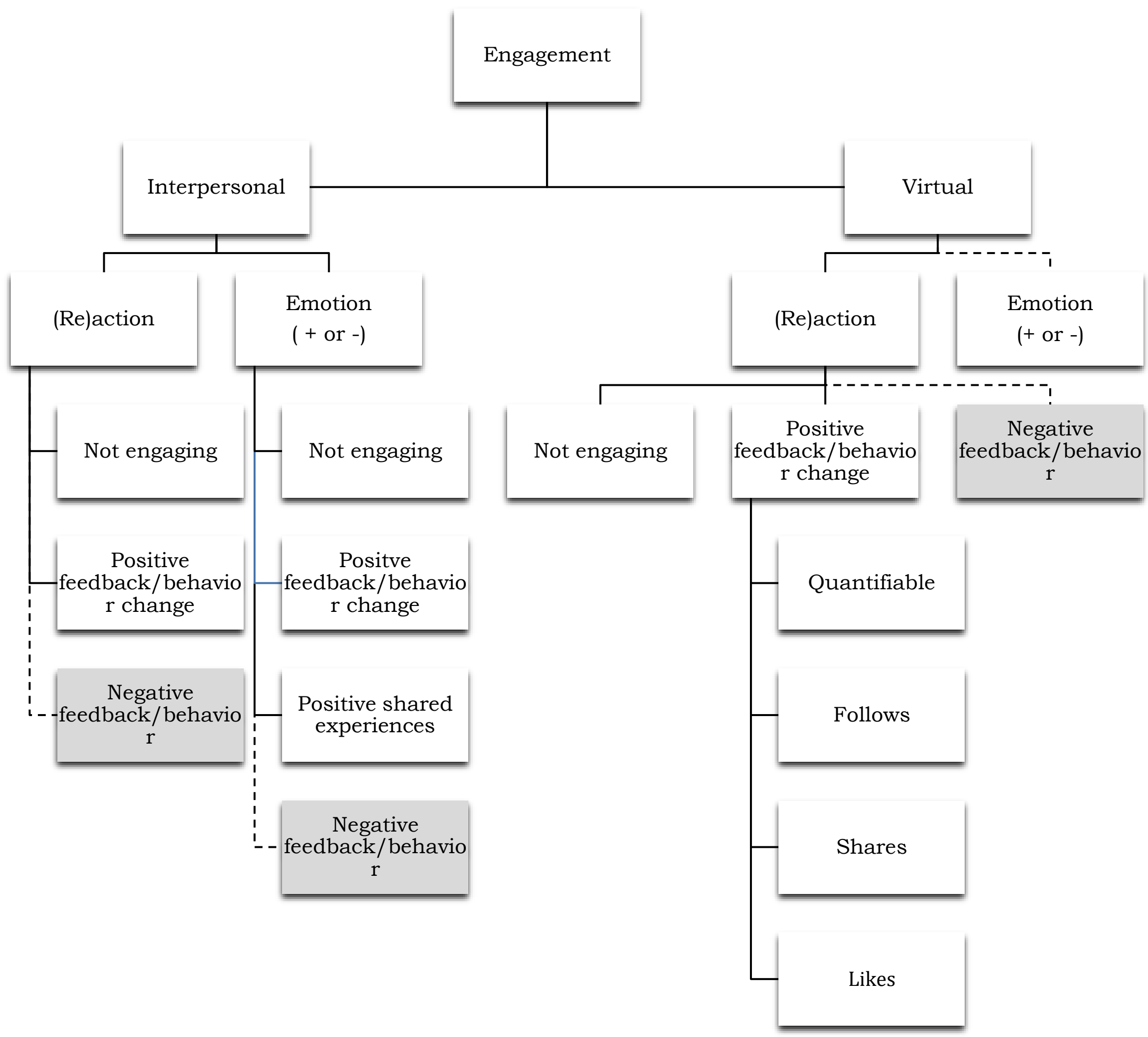


Figure 6.11. Stakeholder-driven Engagement. This illustrates negative feedback and behavior in the on the emotion—(re)action model.

From the responses of practitioners throughout this research, it appears as if the peak of successful engagement, whether interpersonally or virtually influenced by the organization, is to develop positive relationships with stakeholders and to create evangelists to help spread the positive message(s) of the organization. However, negative stakeholder-driven engagement is an equally important aspect for practitioners to anticipate, recognize, and strategize a response.

The negative aspect of stakeholder-driven engagement is also included in Figure 6.12, which visualizes all of the components of engagement participants in this study described where important for them as public relations professionals and important to the success of their organization. When engaging stakeholder groups, practitioners first determine whether they want to trigger an emotion or (re)action. Next, communicators decide whether interpersonal engagement, which has more intimate components, or virtual engagement is appropriate. The objective is for the organizational message to trigger a positive emotion or (re)action in the stakeholder. Stakeholders have the choice not to engage with the organization at all. From positive emotion or (re)action, stakeholders may consider providing positive feedback or making behavior modifications recommended by the organization, both of which have been traditionally measured quantitatively through surveys or experiments. Positive emotions can also lead stakeholder to share their positive experiences with the organization. What has been less explored are shared experiences through inter-stakeholder communication. Finally, while organizations tend to focus on positive engagements, stakeholders can react negatively to the organization or its message, which can lead to negative feedback or behavior, such as in-person or virtual protest.

Figure 6.12. Full Engagement Model

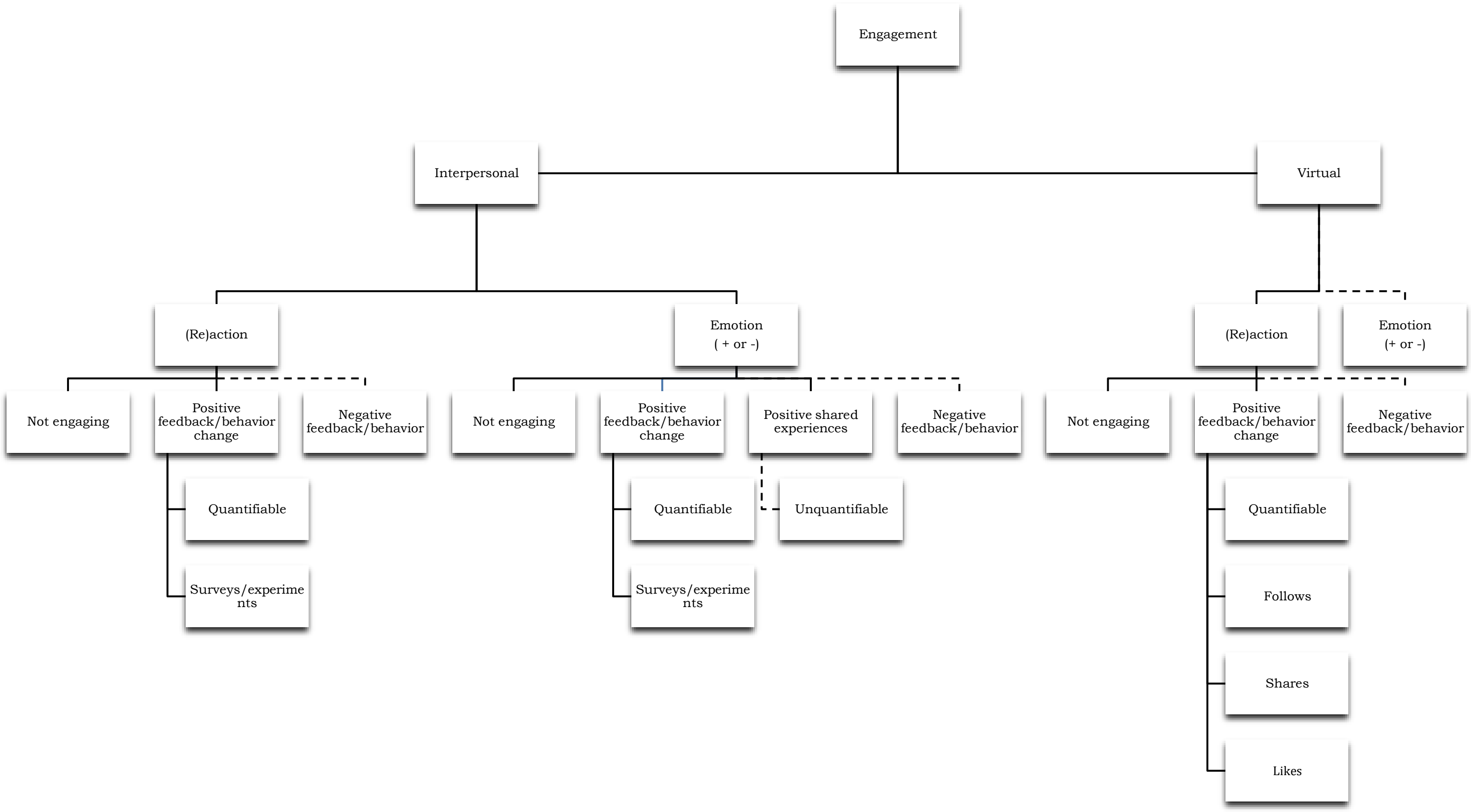


Figure 6.12. Full Engagement Model. This illustrates all of the components of the engagement model.

In summary, when providing characterizations of engagement, practitioners built their descriptions on two constructs – emotion and action. This chapter outlined how public relations practitioners describe engagement principles as they also walk us through how they apply these principles in a way that dutifully honors the organization but also meets the needs of the stakeholders. In addition to identifying the emotion and action constructs, professionals categorize the type of engagement practices in one of two ways – interpersonal engagement or virtual engagement. Interpersonal engagement has been a key component of public relations practice and the type most of these practitioners are comfortable with, particularly senior executives. However, the professionals also acknowledge engagement through virtual spaces is fast becoming part of the public relations practice. The practitioner's duty is to understand and find ways – whether interpersonally or virtually – to deliver the corporate vision to stakeholders as a way to engage them. The effort becomes a balancing act between addressing organization expectations, stakeholder expectations, and their own expectations. Chapter 7 discusses these findings and considers their implications for the practice and for future research.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The previous chapter underscored the multilayered and complex ways practitioners describe and employ engagement to establish, improve, or maintain the organization to public relationship within public relations practice. This study addresses the importance of having a common or shared language used in both scholarship and practice; however, it also points to the challenges of utilizing a term in practice that holds multiple meanings. The findings of this dissertation research extend Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) and Kang's (2014) explanations of engagement by including the public practitioners' perspectives. Results of this study also make an important practical contribution by designing a roadmap of how public relations professionals describe the principles of engagement; how they implement the principles into daily practice; and how they measure the success of engagement as a function of their work. Examining the practitioners' perspectives has led to a richer and more-thorough understanding of engagement, including the role of emotion and action; perceptions of engagement as an interpersonal or virtual process; the challenges of measuring successful engagement; the recognition and potential influence of negative engagement; and finally, the overall expectations placed on practitioners by the organization and stakeholders to implement engagement practices that fulfill both parties' needs.

The overall findings of this dissertation support existing public relations research that suggests engagement is context-specific, particularly when descriptions heard from an internal organizational communications manager may differ from characterizations from a social media manager (e.g., Golob & Podnar, 2014; Lovejoy, Waters, Saxton, 2012; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Welch, 2011), or senior executive views differ from those of middle managers. Nonetheless, I began with the broad question, "what is engagement?" More specifically, how do public relations practitioners describe engagement principles? The professionals' perspectives are based on the messiness of real-world application, which deepen our understanding of the norms yet also force us to reflect on uses of the term employed in organizational practice that conflict with academic considerations.

This chapter discusses the study's results from engagements within organizational settings that demonstrate how practitioners value interpersonal relationships and continue to explore the building of online relationships to the internal and external expectations practitioners feel are their duty to ensure their efforts to engage stakeholders align with the organization's mission and goals. I then address each of the research questions posed in Chapter 5. Following that, I confront the limitations of this research and highlight how the study opens up new avenues for future research. And finally, I offer practical implications of what the findings can mean for practitioners and conclude with perspectives for professionals and scholars.

That said, the next section addresses findings of the first characteristics of engagement described by practitioners—interpersonal and virtual—that are associated with organizational engagement. The section challenges the idea that interpersonal theories have little value in public relations research and practice.

Interpersonal Engagement

A key contribution of this study is how the participants value both the human connection of interpersonal relationships and the potential to engage larger groups through online communication. To date, considerable research has focused on one or the other (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Fox, et al., 2013; Heath, 2006, 2013; Kahn, 1978).

These professionals used interpersonal analogies to discuss their engagement efforts. For example, practitioners made comparisons of successful levels of organizational engagement—from simple interactions to more emotional connections— to the phases of marital engagement. This finding supports work by Hon and Grunig (1999), who designed a scale to measure perceptions of long-term organization—stakeholder relationships based on interpersonal communication scholarship's relational outcomes such as trust, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction to measure stakeholder perceptions of their relationship with organizations. It also challenges contemporary discussions against applying interpersonal frameworks to organization—public relationships based on the idea that interpersonal approaches are ill-suited considerations because of their intimate nature (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Heath, 2006).

In fact, some practitioners favored applying in-person (what interpersonal communication research calls, "intimate" (Knapp, 1978) approaches to building relationships with their stakeholders. While practitioners recognize they are not <u>building</u> intimate, one-on-one relationships with stakeholders, they maintain, however, that they want to establish deep bonds of mutuality, accountability as responsible parties in the relationship, and dependence on the other.

To begin, the professionals interviewed acknowledged a “getting to know you” phase when starting to build a public relationship, which supports aspects of Knapp’s (1978) staircase model of dyadic relationships. Knapp’s framework details the steps to how intimate partner relationships come together by initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding; and how they may fall apart through differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. While a literal interpretation of each step may not be applicable in an organizational context, many of the suggested steps in Knapp’s model have the potential to provide greater understanding of the nature of organization to public relationships.

Organizations could use aspects of Knapp’s (1978) model to outline the steps they take in building public relationships. At each step, an organization can assess whether to maintain the relationship and advance to the next step. The model can also help determine if the public relationship is in distress and in need of repair by using earlier engagement initiatives such as reinforcing the organization’s mission, or deciding if the relationship should be abandoned altogether. For example, in the initiating, or “getting to know you” phase, the organization could determine after evaluating interactions whether the stakeholder member’s or group’s values align with the organization’s mission. As another example, it is important for organizations to have and maintain highly engaged employees. As a result, the steps in Knapp’s model could be evaluated against the relationship the organization has with its employees. Knapp’s model could be used to assess whether previously highly engaged employees who have "fallen off" can be reengaged. This could require particular skills training of practitioners to ensure they understand the nature of interpersonal relationships. Additionally, it is important to consider that organizations are not the only ones to utilize these relationship steps. Stakeholder groups could use elements of Knapp's (1978) model to could help stakeholders better understand whether the relationships they hold with organizations are the right or wrong fit based on their morals and values, needs and expectations. This stakeholder opportunity aligns with Dozier and Lauzen's (2000) argument against relying solely on organization-centric research.

The importance these practitioners placed on building trusting relationships over time also aligns with organization—public relationship concepts (e.g., Broom, et al., 2000; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1994; Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & Gruning, 1999; Ledingham, 2003). Concepts such as Hon and Grunig's trust, commitment, and satisfaction measures might be incorporated into an augmented version of Knapp's (1978) model to further assess organizational engagement.

Interpersonal and relational theories are not the only way public relations practice can consider building public relationships. Advanced communication technologies have stimulated new ways of thinking about establishing organization to public relationships, as well. While practitioners remain unclear about how these communication advancements can effectively develop public relationships, social media, for example, has become a growing aspect of an organization's strategic communication plan.

Virtual engagement

While practitioners recognized the importance of interpersonal relationships, they also recognized that engaging stakeholders in online spaces requires a much-different approach than relying on small group meetings and other person-to-person tactics used offline. Some practitioners explained that how they engage with stakeholders online is different than how they engage with them offline. Online spaces have not only changed how organizations communicate with stakeholders, they have also altered how stakeholders communicate with organizations. Practitioners explained direct connections to stakeholders through online spaces present a new set of complexities such as getting stakeholders to pay attention to organizational messages directed to them. These findings align with how scholars have considered online relationship building (Kent, 2013; Wright & Hinson, 2014). Virtual spaces allow organizations to create online dialogic communicative environments as a way to build lasting relationships. Kent and Taylor (1998) stressed, "It is how the technology is used that influences organization—public relationships" (p. 324). Even with that, practitioners acknowledged they are not communicating with only one stakeholder group. The findings of this study support literature indicating public relations research and practice must advance thinking on ways to build organization to public relationships (e.g., Heath, 2006, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Yang & Taylor, 2015), but the findings also underscore the uncertainty social media brings to the profession. As Kent and Saffer (2014) point out, "The gulf between what our technology can actually do, and how public relations professionals are using social media and new technology, is wide" (p. 573). Even still, communicators are weaving virtual engagement strategies as an important part of establishing new and maintaining old relationships with stakeholder groups.

Participants acknowledged that social media has opened the possibilities for organizations to broaden their reach, which supports scholarly contentions that virtual engagement occurs between the organization and the “masses, ” or collection of diverse stakeholders (Heath, 2006, 2013; Leichty & Springston, 1993). As such, public relations researchers have called for theory development that reflects these more societal and networked perspectives (Heath, 2006, 2013; Kent, Sommerfeldt & Saffer, 2016; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002;Yang & Taylor, 2015). To begin, online spaces, in particular social media platforms, present new sets of routines, rituals, rules, and norms. However, this evolving virtual protocol presents an opportunity to reimagine how to build organization to public relationships that are meaningful to the organization and the stakeholders (Motion et al., 2016; Waddington, 2015). For example, Heath (2006, 2013) describes a paradigm of public relations he refers to as the fully functioning society where building and sustaining healthy communities is the priority, and the organization and the public create formal and informal rules. Fully functioning societies apply pressure on organizations to be more ethical and moral, and public relations becomes the center of focus in its effort to develop relationships between organizations, stakeholders, and other societal partners. Relationships, therefore, between organizations, stakeholders, and other societal partners, though not all, are co-defined and negotiated (Doerfel & Taylor, 2004; Heath, 2013; Taylor, 2010; Yang & Taylor, 2015). As a result, virtual engagement provides practitioners with an opportunity to apply a network approach to communication where organizations examine their networks of relationships (Yang & Taylor, 2015). However, when organizations had more freedoms to select stakeholder groups with which to build relationships, they also took more control over which groups to communicate with. As a result, marginalized parts of society were left out of many organizational conversations and their voices were not considered during organizational decision-making, nor when developing and creating communication initiatives.

Next, professionals expressed interest in learning virtual engagement principles; however, their feelings were tempered by the threat of losing organizational authenticity, legacy, and stakeholder trust through online engagements. Practitioners said the downside of virtual engagement is their inability to assess the genuineness of the exchange between the organization and the stakeholder group through tone. Parties are unable to establish virtually what they could establish interpersonally through a hand gesture or nod of the head. Therefore, organizations must earn and retain the trust of stakeholders when engaging them offline and online. These comments support Huy and Shipilov's (2012) research that examined internal social media use within organizations and its effect on improved internal communication. They found that the authenticity of the organization could be tarnished particularly if the organization and social media leaders were perceived as fake and mistrustful. On the other hand, the authors said social media could help build authenticity when the messages and actions of an organization in virtual spaces align with messages and actions that resonate with stakeholders. This also relates to Hallahan's recommendation that practitioners design online communications that are usable, trustworthy, and satisfying to a diverse group of stakeholders.

Another turning point for organizations employing virtual engagement is the shift in control of communication from the organization to the masses; rather, stakeholders drive many of today's online conversations. This finding supports research showing that power relations have shifted away from practitioners who typically have been the information disseminators to the publics who now have the autonomy to decide with whom they will interact and what they interact about in digital social spaces (Motion, et al., 2016; Smith, 2010). Additionally, publics are more proactive than prior to these technological advancements about how and where they gather information (Guillory & Sundar, 2008; Park & Reber, 2008; Smith, 2013). Bruce and Shelley's (2010) research also points out the organizational voice can no longer dominate contemporary online environments, particularly if organizations are not familiar with the online norms and rules that have emerged. For example, joining an online conversation could have risky consequences for practitioners representing their organizations online if they are not aware of that platform's culture (Coombs & Holladay, 2015). Rather, an organization's online representatives should spend time getting to know the platform's audience before joining a conversation so they can match the tenor of the conversations, perhaps also, investing the resources to hire savvy social media practitioners. Kelleher (2009) found a positive relationship between organizations using a conversational human voice from people within the organization and expressing a commitment to build and maintain a relationship. Additionally, this challenges practitioners to design online communications that are usable, trustworthy, and satisfying to a diverse group of stakeholders (Hallahan, 2003). Kelleher (2009) mentions organizations post Frequently Asked Questions and discussion forums that reflect real exchanges between an organization and its publics, and the use of blogs, which have the ability to humanize the organization.

In summary, practitioners value the ability to make personal connections with stakeholders, through interpersonal engagement, as a way to develop relationships on behalf of the organization. However, virtual engagement opens the door for organizations to reach several stakeholder groups at once and advance their engagement initiatives. The second set of features described by practitioners as important for understanding engagement as emotion and (re)action.

Engagement as emotion and (re)action.

As practitioners described certain features of engagement, results emerged that they attempt to trigger an emotional and/or reactionary response when they engage with stakeholder groups. The following section discusses the role positive emotions play when triggered in employees. Specifically, practitioners linked positive emotions to positive feelings in favor of the organization. Additionally, reactionary responses that compelled employees to act and led to modified stakeholder behaviors were also described as a feature of engagement. Furthermore, professionals indicated that organizational messages sent could motivate organizational members to provide important positive or negative feedback based on message content and engagement strategy efforts.

The role emotions play in engagement.

Participants indicate organizations want to trigger some emotional state within the individual or group of stakeholder so that they feel connected to, supportive of, and/or aligned with the organization's mission and values. The emotion-action model (Figure 6) illustrates the foundation on which organizations build their engagement efforts. In order to activate certain emotions or actions effectively, respondents noted that organizations must be cognizant and willing to address—and perhaps exceed— stakeholder expectations of them.

From an internal organizational communication perspective, participants stated their goal is for employees to feel a strong bond or sense of belonging with the organization and for employees to want to make the workplace better for themselves and their colleagues. The finding supports existing literature regarding organizational identification (Karanika-Murray, et al., 2015; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), which resonates with the emotional and mental attachments employees have to the place where they work (Poole & McPhee, 2009). Mael and Ashforth (1992) suggest organizational identification is the "oneness with the organization and the experience of the organization's success and failures as one's own" (p. 103). This conceptualization of organizational identification builds on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) research, which suggests that a person's identity is tied to their organizational membership. Karanika-Murray and colleagues (2015) explain organizational attachments can lead to behavioral outcomes such as job satisfaction. In this case, positive attitude is one of the desired outcomes expressed by study participants who use employee engagement efforts.

Participants understand how important employees are to enhancing organizational performance, which is a hopeful counterpoint to the historical trend of employees being undervalued and understudied in favor of external stakeholder groups (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014). In particular, participants' responses of ensuring employees' buy-in, wanting employees to give the organization their all, and confirming that their values align with the organization's values, are consistent with scholarship on organizational commitment. Saks (2006) referred to it as an, "emotional or intellectual commitment to the organization" (p. 601). Practitioner descriptions of an emotional connection also support one of two types of commitment described by Robinson and colleagues (2004): affective commitment indicates employees are willing to "go beyond the call of duty for the good of the organization" (p. 7). And, as noted previously, Rees, Alfes, and Gatenby (2013) point to studies that examine the impact of employee voice on employee engagement and define engagement as "the extent to which employees feel positive emotional connections to their work experience" (p. 2782). In the end, employees who care for the organization and their work create a bond with the organization that can influence their work behaviors such as commitment level and job turnover (Karanika-Murray, et al., 2015).

Practitioners also stressed fulfilling stakeholder needs was important to produce positive emotional responses to their engagement efforts and for employees to "feel like the company cares about you." The sense of feeling valued, supports Saks' (2006) finding that employees who felt appreciated by the organization focused more on their job and really tried to help the organization reach its goals. Other research suggests when organizations possess values and organizing principles centered on fulfilling employee needs and acting in their best interest, employees felt like a worthy organizational member (McAllister & Bigley, 2002). In turn, high loyalty ratings and customer satisfaction scores and other company successes are attributed to a more engaged workforce (Jose & Mampilly, 2014; Saks, 2006; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Even still, practitioners in the study indicated their job working with internal stakeholders is to help "people to understand why [their] work is important and how that work supports the goals and the strategy of [the organization]." This viewpoint; however, implies that success for employees begins once they agree to "get on board" and support the organization. In essence, the onus of successful engagement between the organization and the employee falls to the employee and creates an imbalance in the relationship. Communication attempts to convince employees the company cares for them carries persuasive and manipulative undertones that can be exercised through measurement instruments such as employee satisfaction surveys.

Along with feeling valued, the empowerment concept also emerged from respondents who stressed the importance of employees feeling connected to the organization. Empowerment is one of three engagement characteristics Kang (2014) points to as someone is engaged with an organization (affective commitment and positive affectivity are the other two characteristics). Thomas and Velthouse (1990) describe empowerment as an individual's belief or motivation in accomplishing a task. One communicator states her stakeholder groups feel empowered once they were armed with knowledge, or "educated" by the organization, because then they could "take the information back . . . to make change." These findings also support existing scholarship. A dialogic or feedback loop (Kent & Taylor, 1998), can leave employees feeling empowered enough to desire improvement within the organization or want to change the status quo within an organization.

However, negative emotions, particularly those held by employees, can surface when the organization refuses or neglects to fulfill employee needs. Although some participants acknowledge negative emotions exist, they dismissed them as “noise.” Schaufeli and colleagues (2002; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004) described the failure to recognize that an employee’s needs have gone unmet can lead to employee burnout. They stated employees’ emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and low levels of professional efficacy are often produced by negative emotions. In addition, parallels can be drawn from neglect of internal stakeholders to those outside the organization. Shareholder activist scholarship indicates neglecting to fulfill the needs of external stakeholders can open an organization up to a number of high-profile campaigns against the company (Graves, Rehbein, & Waddock, 2001; Rehbein, Waddock, & Graves, 2004) designed to compel organizations to change their social agendas. Hence, this serves as a cautionary tale for practitioners about not fully acknowledging negative engagement as anything more than “noise.”

In summary, when practitioners trigger a positive emotional response in employees, the employees are more likely to feel committed and attached to the organization and feel a sense of belonging and shared identity to the workplace. In addition, these positive emotional responses may influence employees’ work performance. That said, organizations must be willing to acknowledge and fulfill the needs of stakeholders to stimulate those positive emotional responses, and not dismiss negative responses outright. In turn, positive emotional responses from stakeholders can lead to positive reactionary responses from them as well, which is the next characteristic of engagement described in the following section.

The role action plays in engagement.

The second premise upon which practitioners describe characteristics of engagement is to trigger an action or a reaction from stakeholders. Participants state one of the organizational goals is more than providing information to stakeholders but in some cases, presenting messages that compel them to act, which can lead to modified behaviors in ways that the organization wants. Additionally, the organizational messages sent could motivate stakeholder members to provide important positive or negative feedback to the organization on message content and engagement efforts.

Emotional and physical engagements are two significant constructs demonstrated in Welch's (2011) Employee Engagement Concept Model (see Figure 2) that illustrates constructs specific to internal corporate communication: emotional, cognitive, and physical components of engagement. While useful, I argue emotions and actions serve as constructs for a broader consideration of organizational engagement to influence both internal and external stakeholders. Additionally, emotion-action as presented in this research is not an either/or proposition. Naturally, emotions can lead to certain actions or behavior modifications. However, the organization might choose to stir the emotions of their stakeholder group(s) as a way to persuade stakeholders to align with the organization on an issue. The emotion-action distinction draws similar connections to emotion and behavior conceptualizations in marketing research, particularly as practitioners differentiate between a stakeholder member's interest in the organization and their loyalty and dedication to the organization. Similar psychological components exist in marketing research about customer engagement and customer brand loyalty. van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner, and Verhoef (2010) describe customer engagement as communication behaviors such as complaints, positive or negative recommendations or word of mouth, or behaviors that limit or expand the customer's relationship with the brand. The authors add that this type of engagement involves emotional components such as self-brand connection and consumer-brand relationships. Respondents in this research mentioned engagement offers stakeholders a certain amount of "ownership" in the organization and can lead them to advocate or evangelize on behalf of the organization. These stakeholders have associated part of their identity with the organization's brand in lieu of a product brand. Interestingly, practitioners who embrace the vision of the organization, though they did not explicitly indicate this, also serve as evangelists.

In summary, the emotion-action focus on engagement is an important consideration for this study and could not be overlooked as it builds upon existing research in employee engagement and marketing literature (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; van Doorn, et al., 2010; Welch, 2011). The constructs also serve as a basis for which respondents offered narratives on the principles of engagement.

Practitioner Duty

Public relations practitioners are expected to inform the organization's leadership about their effectiveness in building, growing, and/or maintaining stakeholder relationships. Engagement efforts are one way practitioners believe they are able to build organization to public relationships. Practitioners revealed they often find themselves having to “read the tea leaves,” and balance the number of expectations placed on them, which fall into three categories: organizational, stakeholder, and self-expectations. Each of these expectations is discussed within the context of existing literature.

Organizational expectation.

Practitioners believed their responsibility was to represent the organization’s vision, implement engagement initiatives that reinforce the vision, and measure and deliver results to senior leaders. These expectations were often conceived at the highest levels of the organization, although practitioners said they found themselves “reading tea leaves” in order to understand what leadership truly required of them. Practitioners, who are not part of the dominant coalition, felt their obligation was to navigate relationships between top managers and stakeholders in order to fulfill their duty to the organization. However, they seemed uncertain and made quite a few assumptions when expressing an organizational view of engagement. Existing literature supports these findings of uncertainty. The dominant coalition, or the individuals who set the organizational goals and shape organizational behaviors, often dictate which direction communicators should go, and what public relations program they should follow. The power holders underscore the tense power relations that influence strategic and tactical decision-making within the organization (Berger, 2005). These decisions also influence the work of public relations practitioners (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995).

Another organization expectation was for practitioners to show the return on investment of engaging stakeholders. Participants referred to ways of measurement that typically resulted in tangible benefits that senior leadership liked and could also relate to—for example, the number of likes, followers, and friends on social media channels. That kind of reckoning—like advertising value equivalents (AVE)—provides quantitative assessments but it also ignores the unquantifiable components of public relationships, such as tone (of conversation) beyond indicating whether tone is positive or negative, which can be more difficult to measure. Some practitioners noted relying on assessing output (one-way flow of information to either inform or increase stakeholder awareness) and measuring (counting) the back and forth that occurs between the organization and stakeholders to inform top management that the stakeholders received and responded to the organization's message.

Social media have quickly become tools used to understand better ways to address stakeholder' concerns, needs, and preferences. They also serve as a way for practitioners to recognize—and measure—stakeholder attitudes about the organization and its communication initiatives. One practitioner said quantitative approaches such as counting likes and follows on social media, for example, coupled with survey measurements, provide quantifiable data and help her agency evaluate their performance and determine if they are meeting the needs of stakeholders. This supports research by Saxton and Waters (2014), who examined the Facebook behaviors (i.e., likes, comments, and shares) of nonprofit organization stakeholders and found they prefer opportunities that span from one-way information messages to dialogue in an organization's status updates. Constructs emerging from this dissertation may provide additional elements to measure engagement effectiveness such as organization, stakeholder, and practitioner, or self, expectations.

Practitioners said they are uncertain how to demonstrate the value of their engagement efforts. They believe a lack of clear direction may lead them to make assumptions of what they think executives want, or to try to accommodate the leaders' desire to review results gathered by employing easily relatable measurement techniques that may not provide useful information. The finding may point to the value of assessing the accuracy of practitioner perceptions of what leaders expect and leader certainty about their success in expressing what they need, which may be studied using the coorientation theory.

As Newcomb (1953) describes, when two individuals have their own individual and simultaneous orientations or attitudes toward an object of communication, as well as simultaneous orientation toward each other, co-orientation is present. However, when mutual understanding between individuals is off balance and no longer symmetrical in the relationship, true consensus is absent. McLeod and Chaffee (1973) developed a model to measure the perceptions of others' attitudes in interpersonal relationships and effects of coorientation. Application of the model to this discussion, for example, might resemble the following: The practitioner (Person A) knows what she thinks about an object (engagement) and has a perception of what senior leadership (Person B) thinks about the same object. Senior leadership also has thoughts about the practitioner and engagement. Knowing the extent of both their agreement and perceived agreement reflects how well co-oriented the practitioner and leadership are regarding engagement.

Public relations has adopted coorientation as a way to achieve understanding, accuracy, agreement, and congruency between the organization's views and those of their publics toward a particular object (Grunig & Stamm, 1973). Broom (1977) said the results range from true consensus, when the two parties agree and accurately perceive they agree, to dissensus, when the two disagree and correctly perceive that disagreement. Incorrect perceptions may reflect false conflict (an assumption of disagreement that is not present) or false consensus (an assumption of disagreement that does not exist).

Grunig (1972) applied the coorientation model to determine the level of understanding between organizations concerned with low-and moderate-income housing and residents in a suburban community. Coorientation also has been used to assess relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists (Shin & Cameron, 2005), practitioners and attorneys (Reber, Cropp, & Cameron, 2001), donors and fundraisers (Waters, 2009), and parents and teachers (Williamson, 2010).

In the situation described above, practitioners and top managers appear to experience false consensus in how they think about engagement. While they disagree on descriptions of engagement, there appears to be an inaccurate presumption that both parties actually agree on what engagement is. Using the coorientation model, then, becomes a beneficial way to measure agreement, accuracy, and understanding between the parties in order to reestablish symmetrical communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), whether they are the practitioners and leaders or stakeholders and practitioners.

Stakeholder expectation.

The second area of focus for the practitioner's duty is to weigh the needs, desires, and expectations of stakeholders against the needs of the organization.

Practitioners stated part of their duty is to find a common thread by “listening” to stakeholders when they provided feedback and to create a “two-way street” environment. By doing so, communicators believe stakeholders are more open to communicating their “shared experiences” with the organization. These findings support stakeholder engagement literature. That describes stakeholder engagement as “a process [that enables] voices to be heard without one voice dominating dialogue” (Bruce & Shelley, 2010, p. 33).

Robinson, et al. (2004) offer “two-way” as a condition by which engagement can be considered win-win between employees and organizations. Organizations must nurture, maintain, and create positive experiences with employees by cultivating two-way relationships. The authors also state that in return, employees may choose to work with their colleagues in order to improve job performance in a way that benefits the organization.

The two-way symmetrical exchange emphasizes the organization’s willingness to not only listen to feedback from stakeholders, but also respond to their concerns (Bruce & Shelley, 2010), and consider how their concerns and expectations could be met (Devin & Lane, 2014). Those expectations are met mostly through building meaningful relationships with organizations (Golob & Podnar, 2014; Wang & Chaudhri, 2009). Engagement can then become a two-way, participatory act that allows stakeholders to be involved in the organization’s business activities and decision-making. Engagement also becomes a collective effort to build trust between parties rather than merely an effort to manage stakeholder expectations to meet its long-term business goals. Fulfilling expectations of stakeholders and the organization can also present practitioners with the opportunities that exist for them to do good for society.

For the good of society.

An area of public relations research not yet fully explored is addressing stakeholders' "shared experiences" or "points of engagement." As Taylor (2000a) notes, "Public relations, through its focus on media relations and relationship building, is an integral part of the civil society function. Civil society organizations need to reach various publics with information and create links between like-minded groups" (p. 3). For example, an organization's stated strategy may be to increase the number of likes, shares, and comments on content created and posted to a social media platform such as Facebook. Practitioners interviewed explained that, however flawed, increasing likes, shares, and comments, was the organization's approach to engagement with stakeholders.

Expanding this thinking, I present a hypothetical scenario to expand the engagement: Stakeholder member A views content created and posted by an organization that she follows. A likes the posts and chooses to comment on the content. The comment expresses a connection A has with the content. The organization responds to A's comment. If A responds back, some practitioners in the study would indicate that engagement is in progress because of the back–and-forth exchange. Additionally, Stakeholder member B views the same content on the organization's Facebook page, likes it and posts a shared memory and a back-and-forth exchange occurs between B and the organization. Again, engagement, according to some communicators, has occurred. However, what is the organization's responsibility to connect A and B? Both parties have independent but similar experiences with the organization. To this point, A and B have only communicated their experiences with the organization. I argue if the organization connected A and B through their shared experiences, the organization would be a contributor to network formation or coalition building, hence, becoming an active participant in a fully functioning society (Heath, 2013). In this instance, fulfilling its own mission does not solely fuel the organization's motivation; it is also concerned with functioning for the good of A, B, and society. Considering this sort of approach addresses the call by researchers to reimagine how to develop meaningful relationships between organizations, stakeholders, and other societal partners (Heath, 2006, 2013; Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Motion et al., 2016; Taylor, 2000b; Waddington, 2015; Yang & Taylor, 2015). Additionally, these considerations open research possibilities in the area of inter-stakeholder communication. For example, the high-low level engagement model (See Figure 14) that illustrates how research participants perceive engagement efforts between the organization and stakeholders could be reimagined to include a separate engagement model for stakeholder-to-stakeholder.

The final construct for the practitioner's duty is their ability to balance the expectations they have of themselves as they are pulled in one direction to address the needs of their organization and in another direction to address the needs of stakeholders. This concept is called self-expectation.

Self-expectation.

Changes within our global society have forced the public relations field to evolve. Therefore, it is not uncommon for practitioners to experience role ambiguity. Practitioners interviewed said they have "high standards" for themselves and tend to perform a variety of roles required for different situations. For example, some professionals said they have served in the role of "bridge," "translator," and "traffic cop," which reflects what Broom and Smith (1978) call the communication facilitator, who manages the information flow between management and stakeholders. In this regard, they serve as communication links and interpreters. Other practitioners referred to their role as "strategist," which is in line with Broom and Smith's problem-solving process facilitators who work side-by-side with management to help them solve problems. While senior managers were more likely to describe their role as one of strategist, middle managers describe it in line with Broom and Smith's communication technician role. These practitioners are essential players within the organization because they carry out the mandated communication service as instructed by the dominant coalition, however, they are not part of the dominant coalition. Even though distinctions can be drawn between roles, it is not unusual for these practitioners to play multiple roles at once. Understanding the roles they play within the organization has helped these practitioners fulfill what they expect of themselves as professionals who want to be a valuable asset to the organization.

Furthermore, demonstrating that organizational goals are met also serves as validation to organizational senior leaders that public relations is a value-added function of the organization that deserves a seat at the table of decision-makers. Practitioners feel the weight of expectations as they serve the organization and stakeholders simultaneously, which supports the overarching role of public relations to balance the self-interests of the organization with the interests of society (Anderson & Reagan, 1992; Berger, 2005).

This was particularly true of the middle managers who describe the guesswork involved with understanding not just the organization's vision, but also the expectations of top management. From an organizational perspective, mid-career communicators serve as the intermediary between front-line staff and executives, and they become the organization's bridge between the vision and implementation of that vision. From a stakeholder perspective, these professionals bridge the engagement efforts such as starting the conversation with groups and listening to their feedback. These findings support research that describes the practitioner's role as organizational boundary spanner, or the link between the organization and the environment (Aldrich & Herker, 1976; Grunig & Hunt, 1984, Grunig, Grunig, Ehling, 1992). Aldrich and Herker maintain the boundary spanner serves as an information filter and facilitator for the organization. Boundary spanning has been defined as individuals, in this instance, practitioners, within an organization with strong communication skills and linked networks both inside and outside the organization (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981).

In summary, this section described three constructs that emerged from the dissertation that highlight the tensions practitioners face on a daily in their work. Practitioners have a responsibility to represent the organization's vision; fulfill the needs of internal and external stakeholders; but also as boundary spanners, they acknowledge they have roles and responsibilities to consider in order to fulfill they expectations they have of themselves. The next section addresses what can occur when stakeholders feel their needs are ignored or unmet.

Stakeholder-driven Engagement

Organizations typically attempt to put on a positive face for the stakeholder groups they want to influence. However, these stakeholders do not always respond to the organization's engagement efforts in the preferred manner. Various reasons, including negative expectations or the neglect of fulfilling expectations, could lead to a negative emotional or behavioral response from them. A few participants provided narratives about negative stakeholder-driven engagement—the antithesis of their positive stakeholder engagement efforts. They stated that not every negative engagement spurred by a stakeholder requires a response from the organization particularly if/when the stakeholder or stakeholder group is not part of their target audience. This asymmetrical communication approach positions the organization to decide who is or is not worth communicating with. The finding supports a growing area of public relations scholarship and ongoing research in interpersonal communication and relationship marketing (Bruning and Ledingham, 1998; Duck, 1982; Dwyer & Schurr, 1987; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Moon & Rhee, 2013). Much of this literature has focused on positive dimensions of these relationships such as Hon and Grunig's (1999) often-used relational scales that include control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment; as well as Bruning and Ledingham's (1998) OPR dimensions: trust, openness, involvement, commitment, investment and community relationship. On the other hand, Moon and Rhee (2013) investigated the negative aspects of organization-public relationships and developed a scale that identifies negative relationships between organizations and stakeholder groups based on four features: dissatisfaction, distrust, control dominance, and dissolution. In addition, the authors found that the public's perceptions of relationships with organizations influence how they behave when discussing their opinions about organizations. This further supports the need to rethink existing interpersonal relationship models such as Knapp's (1978). Incorporating the steps to how relationships come apart (i.e., differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating) along with understanding the public's positive and negative perceptions of their relationships with organizations are important for public relations research and the field.

While practitioners may not want to dwell on the negative aspects of the stakeholder relationship, avoiding or ignoring a negative engagement, and adopting an asymmetrical communication approach, could backfire and threaten the organization's reputation. For example, in 2014, the New York City Police Department asked its followers on Twitter to send images of themselves with NYPD officers. Instead of the positive responses they had hoped to receive, they received the opposite. Twitter users instead posted images of police brutality involving the NYPD (Ford, 2014; Oh, 2014). It is important to also point out that the NYPD's attempt to engage with the public was also a likely attempt to repair its reputation from strained relationships between law enforcement and communities around the country. Organization failures to engage like this emphasize the need for practitioners to continuously monitor how messages are received by stakeholders, but even more than that, understanding that stakeholders hold various viewpoints, some of which differ from the organization. It is essential that these standpoints are continuously listened to and considered. Additionally, practitioners must anticipate negative reactions to the organization's messages by stakeholders and think through what could happen and plan ahead by devising issues and crisis documents.

From a theoretical perspective, negative stakeholder-driven engagement underscores the value of mutual understanding to promote symmetry in the organization to public relationship. Additionally, when symmetry is off balance, the likelihood that both parties can reach true consensus may be affected. McCleod and Chaffee's (1973) co-orientation model could help practitioners understand the stakeholders' positions and where they are coming from.

Thus far, this chapter has detailed practitioner perspectives of engagement. These characteristics relate to the interpersonal and virtual considerations of engagement; the emotional and participatory aspects of engagement; and the internal and external engagement expectations held by practitioners, the organization, and stakeholders. The next section revisits the study's three research questions.

Addressing Research Questions

This section addresses each of the three research questions that guided this dissertation. The first research question asked, What are the varied perspectives and meanings practitioners hold to describe and understand the features of engagement? Collectively, this diverse group of practitioners was able to express their understandings of the term in ways that underscore the term's complex and multifaceted nature; their descriptions also support existing public relations theoretical concepts, including Grunig's four models (Hunt & Grunig, 1984), dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002), and relationship management (Broom, et al., 2000; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000). The following table shows descriptions and synonyms of engagement that professionals provided (see Table 7). The descriptions in Table 7 were then tied back to relevant literature.

Table 7

Practitioner Descriptions of Engagement

Respondent	Engagement Descriptions	Engagement Synonyms	Literature Notes	Scholarship
1	To care, to feel a part of something, to have a stake in something, state of how stakeholders feel	Physical and mental involvement, to educate, to inform, to make stakeholders care	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Employee engagement concept model	Welch, 2011
			Organizational identification	Karanika-Murray et al., 2015 Mael & Ashforth, 1992 Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013 Saks, 2006 Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004
			Social identity theory	Tajfel & Turner, 1979
2	Interaction with stakeholder groups	Outreach, forward-leaning, effective communication	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Interactivity	Kiousis (2002)
3	Interaction with social media content (clicks, likes, shares); stakeholder action taken based on information provided by organization	Action, empowered	Public information	Broom, 1982 DiStaso & Bortree, 2014 Duhé, 2015 Grunig & Hunt, 1984 L. A. Grunig, 1990
			Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Mixed motives	Murphy, 1991 Perret, 2003 Plowman, 1998
			Empowerment	Kang, 2014 Kent & Taylor, 1998
			Interactivity	Kiousis, 2002

Table 7

Practitioner Descriptions of Engagement (cont.)

Respondent	Engagement Descriptions	Engagement Synonyms	Literature Notes	Scholarship
4	Interaction with stakeholders; relationship building	Commitment, involvement, outreach	Two-way symmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006
			Interactivity	Kiousis, 2002
			Organization—public relationships	Bruning & Ledingham, 2000 Hon & Grunig, 1999 Ledingham, 2003
5	Listening, communication, two-way conversation	Feedback, two-way communication, listening, stakeholder involvement	Dialogue	Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002 Taylor & Kent, 2014 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
			Two-way symmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006
6	Strength of the relationship with stakeholder; balance of quality with quantity	Relationship, dialogue, listening, connection	Dialogue	Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002 Taylor & Kent, 2014 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
			Organization—public relationships	Bruning & Ledingham, 2000 Hon & Grunig, 1999 Ledingham, 2003

Table 7

Practitioner Descriptions of Engagement (cont.)

Respondent	Engagement Descriptions	Engagement Synonyms	Literature Notes	Scholarship
7	How organization delivers message (communication); how organization shows its value to stakeholders; targeted messages to stakeholder groups	Interaction, two-way communication	Interactivity	Kiousis, 2002
			Public information	Broom, 1982 DiStaso & Bortree, 2014 Duhé, 2015 Grunig & Hunt, 1984 L. A. Grunig, 1990
			Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Customer engagement	Kelleher, 2009 van Doorn et al., 2010
8	An exchange	Attention, focus, action, exchange of energy (giving or receiving)	Dialogue	Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002 Taylor & Kent, 2014 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
			Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Two-way symmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006

Table 7

Practitioner Descriptions of Engagement (cont.)

Respondent	Engagement Descriptions	Engagement Synonyms	Literature Notes	Scholarship
9	Dialogue, sharing, two-way, listening	Interaction, back and forth between the organization and stakeholders	Dialogue	Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002 Taylor & Kent, 2014 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
			Two-way symmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006
			Interactivity	Kiousis, 2002
10	Feeling connected with the organization, wants to make organization better place for themselves and colleagues	Satisfaction, ownership, connection	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Affective commitment	Kang, 2014 Robinson, et al., 2004
			Organizational identification	Karanika-Murray et al., 2015 Mael & Ashforth, 1992 Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013 Saks, 2006 Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004
			Social identity theory	Tajfel & Turner, 1979

Table 7

Practitioner Descriptions of Engagement (cont.)

Respondent	Engagement Descriptions	Engagement Synonyms	Literature Notes	Scholarship
11	Communication, back and forth; involves all parties	Inclusiveness, respect, two-way communication, feedback, buy-in, full attention	Dialogue	Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002 Taylor & Kent, 2014 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
			Two-way symmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006
			Organizational buy-in	Saks, 2006; Robinson et al, 2004 Rees, Alfes, and Gatenby, 2013
12	Influencing stakeholders, increasing organizational membership	Interaction, participation, attention	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Organizational identification	Karanika-Murray et al., 2015 Mael & Ashforth, 1992 Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013 Saks, 2006 Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004

Table 7

Practitioner Descriptions of Engagement (cont.)

Respondent	Engagement Descriptions	Engagement Synonyms	Literature Notes	Scholarship
13	Back and forth communication with stakeholders	Conversation, listening, motivation, problem-solving, feedback	Dialogue	Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002 Taylor & Kent, 2014 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
			Two-way symmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006
14	Connecting stakeholders to mission of organization	Connection, team player	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Organization—public relationship	Bruning & Ledingham, 2000 Hon & Grunig, 1999 Ledingham, 2003
15	Internal communication: identification with organization, assimilation with organizational culture Social media: interaction with social media content (shares, likes, retweets)	Empowered, interaction, connection	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Empowerment	Kang, 2014 Kent & Taylor, 1998
			Interactivity	Kiousis, 2002
			Organizational identification	Karanika-Murray et al., 2015 Mael & Ashforth, 1992 Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013 Saks, 2006 Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004
			Social identity theory	Tajfel & Turner, 1979

Table 7

Practitioner Descriptions of Engagement (cont.)

Respondent	Engagement Descriptions	Engagement Synonyms	Literature Notes	Scholarship
16	Communication	Communication, reacting, feedback, back and forth	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
17	Activity, give and take	Connection, feedback, enhanced experience	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003
			Dialogue	Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002 Taylor & Kent, 2014 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
18	Create a relationship or influence an outcome; explaining, exploring, executing	Connection	Dialogue	Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002 Taylor & Kent, 2014 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
			Two-way symmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006
			Organization—public relationship	Bruning & Ledingham, 2000 Hon & Grunig, 1999 Ledingham, 2003

Table 7

Practitioner Descriptions of Engagement (cont.)

Respondent	Engagement Descriptions	Engagement Synonyms	Literature Notes	Scholarship
19	Inspiring or motivating stakeholders to participate, commitment to a relationship	Partnership	Two-way symmetrical Empowerment Dialogue	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Heath, Pearce, Shotter, & Taylor, 2006 Kang, 2014 Kent & Taylor, 1998 Bruce & Shelley, 2010 Golob & Podnar, 2014 Kang, 2014 Kent & Taylor, 1998 Wang & Chaudhri, 2009
20	Digital: Opening email Interpersonal: Opportunity for organization to start a conversation about their product or service	Willing to talk, feedback, interest, listening	Two-way asymmetrical	Grunig & Hunt, 1984 Perret, 2003

More than forty different synonyms were provided among the 20 professionals who participated in this research. The most-common terms practitioners used to describe engagement were “involvement,” “attention,” “feedback,” “listening,” “connection,” and “(two-way) communication.” That said, more than half (12) of these communicators described engagement from the two-way asymmetric, or persuasive perspectives. This means the organization remains in control of the relationship with its stakeholders, and its focus is to get stakeholders to come around to the organization’s way of thinking. For example, while terms such as “interaction” and “connection” were used, when respondents explained these descriptions of engagement in detail, comments such as, “identification with [the] organization,” and “assimilation with [the] organizational[‘s] culture” were offered. The persuasive approach, as described by Grunig and Hunt (1984) has been a long-standing way in which public relations has been practiced and demonstrates limited innovation of thought or evolution of practice on the part of public relations professionals. It also fails to consider the stakeholder as a true partner in the relationship and ignores the organization’s responsibility to its stakeholders. It becomes the basis for assumptions to be made from both perspectives—the organization and stakeholders. However, the disconnect between the two parties further emphasizes the need for theories and models, such as coorientation, that help both groups work to establish agreement, accuracy, and understanding between their perceptions of the other (Broom, 1977; McLeod & Chafee, 1973). These efforts can also help dispel misguided assumptions.

Another public relations model commonly practiced and confirmed by this research was the one-way push of information to stakeholders with no intention of receiving stakeholder feedback, which Grunig and Hunt (1984) called the public information model. Even though the term “feedback” was used by more than half of communicators as a synonym for engagement, the use of “feedback” contradicted the more in-depth descriptions of engagement provided. Additionally, the two-way asymmetrical model was used based on practitioner comments that made reference to the organization sending “targeted messages to stakeholders,” and “stakeholder action [being] taken based on information provided by [the] organization.” Targeted, in this case, often-meant practitioners did research to know which stakeholders would respond to which message.

Finally, a small number of practitioners (8) explained engagement in ways similar to recent scholarship that emphasizes the need for balance or mutuality to occur through dialogue and symmetry within the organization—public relationship (Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). The difference, however, are practitioners' use of the term "dialogue." The use of the term in public relations practice holds a different definition than how the literature expresses the term. In scholarship, dialogue is clearly situated as a separate term than engagement, whereas in practice the two terms are synonymous.

It is also evident that the study participants describe engagement in ways that reflect interpersonal communication concepts such as organizational identification (Karanika-Murray, et al., 2015; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), organizational commitment (Saks, 2006), affective commitment (Robinson et al., 2004), and empowerment (Kang, 2014; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). This furthers the argument that public relations scholarship must not dismiss the contributions of interpersonal frameworks. Additionally, participants' descriptions reflect marketing concepts related to customer brand loyalty (van Doorn et al., 2010), empowerment (Jose & Mampilly, 2014; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990), and shareholder activism (Graves, Rehbein, & Waddock, 2001; Rehbein, Waddock, & Graves, 2004).

RQ2: How do practitioners manage engagement efforts among internal and external stakeholders?

Once communicators explained the features of engagement, the second research question addressed how practitioners implement engagement efforts. These professionals helped discern which characteristics used to describe engagement mirrored their day-to-day strategic efforts to engage stakeholder groups. Of particular interest was the shift that these practitioners have seen from interpersonal forms of communication and engagement to online, or virtual, forms of engagement. Practitioners emphasized wanting to preserve some of the more-intimate ways of building relationships with stakeholder groups even in the digital age, including face-to-face and small group meetings. However, to be clear, practitioners did not suggest an either/or proposition. They recognize that there is room for both interpersonal and virtual forms of engagement.

RQ3: How do practitioners gauge whether successful engagement efforts meet the needs of the organization's goals and mission?

The last research question examined what practitioners believe to be successful engagement practices. The responses were not as simple as one might anticipate because communicators believe that their descriptions of successful engagement may not align with what top managers consider successful engagement. Practitioners' perspectives opened conversations about the value placed on quantitative results—for example, the number of likes, comments, and shares on social media platforms—as a way to measure successful communication initiatives. Some practitioners explicitly stated that numbers matter to the organization's bottom line but could not address elements of comment, tone, or those measures that are unquantifiable. They're not alone in their frustration. The 2016 Global Communication Report found that about two-thirds of respondents say they rely on reach and quantity of impressions to measure success in general, and three-quarters of respondents say they report the number of followers and likes. Substantially fewer track tone and how it changes. Practitioners recognize they need better measurements to capture more meaningful data. Researchers continue to address these areas of concern (e.g., Cabosky, 2016; Jeffrey, 2013; Payne, 2016; Stoeckle, 2017).

In summary, the findings of this dissertation guided by these three questions provide support for existing areas of public relations and organizational communication literature that address engagement: employee engagement and the ever-increasing focus on social media engagement. The findings also draw attention to gaps in engagement scholarship that can be considered for future research.

Research Limitations and Future Research

All research has limitations that should be acknowledged. While this dissertation is no different, its limitations in no way reduce the significance of its findings. Instead, the limitations described reveal opportunities for future research. First and foremost, qualitative research is not generalizable. As such, I am unable to claim that my research findings reflect the attitudes of the population of public relations practitioners. However, in-depth interviews conducted with 20 practitioners provide a useful glimpse into the mindset of professionals that until now was ostensibly missing scholarly discussions. While a starting point, this research aptly highlights the practitioners' understanding of the nature of engagement as a complex phenomenon, and their descriptions reflect strongly on theoretical concepts in public relations, interpersonal communications, and related fields. Given the fact that engagement can be considered the current "buzz" term within organizations and the profession, I found the nature of the research topic was of interest to many practitioners who offered their assistance to the study and are interested in learning more about my results. I will continue this research and will include practitioners absent from this round of interviews. For example, I want to conduct additional interviews about engagement specific to practitioner job functions within organizations (i.e., employee relations, social media, media relations, etc.). Doing so will allow me to more thoroughly address the findings of how professionals understand the segmented nature of engagement based on their business unit.

While some may consider engagement to be the word “du jour,” based on my findings, there seem to be features of the term expressed by professionals that are worth further exploration. This research explored expectations practitioners have of themselves when it comes to engaging stakeholders on behalf of the organization. Some practitioners had definite feelings about where their role begins and ends in attempts to engage stakeholders. These professionals were also clear that stakeholders were to shoulder some of the responsibility as well. For example, an internal communications manager stated she did not feel obligated to facilitate “intimate” relationships between staff members. She believes her role is to pave the way to deeper relationships but the work rests with individual employees. Scholars have challenged the idea that organizations, which are not individuals, can build close relationships with stakeholders (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2015). However, this professional indicated that, as an agent of the organization, her duty is to build the framework that starts the process, and employees at every level of the organization can then perform the actual work—from executives walking the halls to get to know employees by name, to front-line staff and middle managers getting to know each other on a level deeper than the subordinate-insubordinate roles. The subtleties connect to negative types of engagement. When the employee is able to build "intimate" relationships within the organization, how does that influence their openness to the organization's engagement efforts? While this is not engagement as conceptualized theoretically, it lays a foundation for engagement to occur. Examining where internal communication practitioners believe their role begins and ends inside an organization warrants deeper exploration.

Another area of consideration for future research is to examine how the channel(s) practitioners use influence their engagement efforts. For example, if the practitioner chooses to use traditional one-way communication channels designed to inform, not persuade (e.g., television, radio, newspaper), how do those channels influence stakeholder engagement particularly if the goal is for them to take action? Additionally, what is the impact when practitioners engage using social media? This line of research may be of particular interest to political communication scholars who may explore the ways politicians engage with their stakeholders prior to, during, and after elections. Additionally, corporate and activist organizations might find it useful to examine the channels they can use for mobilization of stakeholders and to consider which channels influence their efforts to change policies and address social issues.

Additionally, practitioners' subtle dismissals and lack of complete transparency addressing the effect of negative stakeholder-driven engagement makes this an area suitable for future research particularly with regard to public relations and activism. Providing deeper examinations of negative stakeholder engagement and its effect on the organization's reputation and how organizations respond to these groups will benefit this growing area of research.

Finally, a criticism of current public relations research is its Western-dominant focus (Cheney & Christiansen, 2001; Fitch & Surma, 2006; Jelen, 2008). This research only provides Western descriptions of the characteristics of engagement and what it means to Western organizations. In the global society in which we live, it is worth examining how international organizations and their public relations professionals describe engagement. This approach will help us better understand if engagement is a relevant term within their practices, and if not, what other term(s) and their characteristics may better describe what they do?

Practical Implications

The findings of this research serve as a roadmap for public relations practitioners for two reasons. The first reason is simple; words matter. As part of their job function, practitioners are responsible for drafting and producing communication initiatives that align with their organization's long-and-short-term goals. The communication plan is where statements about the organization's engagement efforts are strategically explained. Practitioners should take a more-sophisticated approach in their thinking about what engagement means for their organization and its stakeholders by considering whether the initial goal is to trigger an emotion or to encourage action, and then in what ways the engagement will occur (e.g., interpersonally or virtually). Additionally, this understanding should be shared across organizational units. This study reveals that engagement can hold different meanings to different groups within the same organization (i.e., internal communication, media relations, public relations, etc.). Without a common lexicon, lines of communication within the organization may become crossed if there is overlap in operations. A common language will help organizations work well together toward a common goal.

Secondly, the engagement model I developed (Figure 6.12) can provide organizations important elements of engagement to consider when assessing how internal and external stakeholders physically, emotionally, and cognitively express themselves in their work life, as determined by Kahn (1990) and his work on personal engagement. The verb "to engage" has several meanings, according to the Oxford Dictionary (1996), including "to employ, or hire, to hold fast, to bind by a contract, to come into battle, and to take part." All of these meanings suggest a behavioral focus (van Doorn, Lemon, Mittal, Nass, Pick, Pirner, & Verhoef, 2010). The findings of this research indicate triggering the emotions is equally important to acknowledge and research from a public relations perspective. Practitioners have an opportunity to explicitly consider whether they will focus their strategies on the emotional and/or behavioral continuum of high and low levels of engagement and whether they will use interpersonal or virtual strategies to accomplish the engagement initiatives.

Finally, there is an opportunity pedagogically to incorporate these choices in public relations curriculum and share them in the classroom with public relations students. For example, courses that focus on public relations research can go beyond assessments of output measures and instead assess tone and how tone may change among stakeholders over time; management classes might develop case study approaches that show successes and failures by corporations, advocacy groups, politicians, and others.

Conclusion

This dissertation research explored the perspectives of public relations practitioners as a way to gain greater understanding of how engagement is described from the people who perform it daily. The findings broaden our understanding of the challenges practitioners face coordinating organizational, stakeholder, and personal expectations, their need to advance the practice by implementing engagement online and offline, and their realization that online spaces have changed the dynamic of how organizations and stakeholders communicate with each other. And even more importantly, findings of this study support the contention that public relations practitioners are aware of the principles of engagement despite, by their own admission, not consulting the academic journals that provide theoretical grounding and normative ideals.

Engagement is not a new concept. The field of public relations has grappled with defining the concept for at least two decades and scholars in other fields even longer. Through this dissertation research, scholars can take a holistic view of the term and partner with practitioners so both parties can advance.

APPENDIX A: STUDY PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND CONSENT FORM

[insert date]

Name
Address
Address

Dear XXXX,

I hope you are well. [insert name] suggested that I reach out to you for help.

I am a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the School of Media and Journalism. As part of my dissertation research, I am investigating the ways in which the term engagement is used among practitioners.

Engagement is frequently described from how employees identify with their organization to the impact that social media and its content has on the public. Rarely; however, is a concrete definition for engagement provided. There is no better way to understand this phenomenon than to interview and gain insight directly from practitioners.

That said, I would like to invite you to be a part of this research by granting me an opportunity to interview you. The interview would last no more than 90 minutes. Of course, participation is voluntary and you are able to skip questions or discontinue the interview at any time. Additionally, you have the option not to use your name if you choose. The interview can be completed via Skype or in-person.

If this is something in which you are willing to participate, please read, sign, and return the attached consent form. I will call you in the next day or two to schedule a day and time for the interview.

Thank you in advance for your time.

Stephanie L. Mahin
Roy H. Park Doctoral Fellow

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Adult Participants: Public Relations Practitioners
Consent Form Version Date: November 11, 2016
IRB Study # 16-2441
Title of Study: Putting the cart before the horse?: Assessing the role of engagement in organization—public relationships
Principal Investigator: Stephanie Mahin
Principal Investigator Department: School of Media & Journalism Administration
Principal Investigator Phone number: 919-749-1605
Principal Investigator Email Address: stephanie_mahin@unc.edu
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Lois Boynton
Faculty Advisor Contact Information: 919-843-8342

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty. Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
This study examines how public relations practitioners think about engagement and its role in the building of organization—public relationships. The interview will ask questions about your role as a practitioner, your use of social platforms as part of your organization's communication strategy, and the expected outcomes with various publics. You are being asked to take part in the study because your professional experience will make a strong contribution to this research.

How long will your part in this study last?
Participation in the interview should take about 60 minutes but no longer than 90 minutes.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
You are asked to do an in-person, phone, or Skype interview with the principal investigator. The researcher will ask questions about your professional use of social media, generally, and specific to the needs of the organization. The principal investigator will record the interview in order to ensure accuracy during research analysis.

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?
Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. The benefits to you from being in this study may surface as you participate in conversations about social media engagement. It may heighten your awareness of the current role that you play in within your organization and the profession.

How will information about you be protected?
Your name will not be linked with your responses. We will securely store your responses. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety.

What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?
You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What if you have questions about this study?
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions about the study (including payments), complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

____ ________________
Signature of Research Participant Date

____

Printed Name of Research Participant

Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent

Date

Stephanie Mahin

Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent

Interviewee Profile

Please take a few minutes to fill out questions about you, your role within the organization, and the organization. This is information is as important as the interview. Once you have completed the profile, please promptly return to Stephanie_mahin@unc.edu .

Name: ____

Organization: ____

Title: ____

1. Do you wish to remain anonymous for this study?
- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No

2. How many years have you been a public relations professional?

____

3. How many employees are in your organization?

____

4. How many years have you been a public relations professional with your organization?

____

5. How would you describe your position?
- ❍ Entry-level/Junior
- ❍ Mid-Career/Manager
- ❍ Senior Executive

6. Approximately what percent of your job responsibilities include:

Strategy __________

Tactics ___________

7. How long have you worked in your current position for your organization?

____

8. Is your position?
- ❍ In-house
- ❍ Agency

9. What is the name of your department? _________________________

10. How many are in your department? _____________________

11. How would you describe the industry/sector in which you work?

______ Government

______ Nonprofit

______ For-profit

______ Healthcare

______ Sports

Other (please specify): ____

12. Please mark each group with which you work as part of your required job responsibilities.

______ Board Members

______ Community Members

______ Employees

______ Legislative/Government Members

______ News Media

______ Patients (healthcare industry only)

______ Donors
______ Investors/Shareholders

______ Consumers/Customers (non healthcare-related industries)

Other (please specify) ____

13. Are you?
- ❍ Male
- ❍ Female

14. Are you Hispanic or Latino(a)?
- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No

15. What is your race or ethnicity?
- ❍ White/Caucasian
- ❍ Black/African-American
- ❍ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ❍ American Indian/Native American
- ❍ Other: Please specify ____________________

16. What is your age?
- ❍ 18-24 years old
- ❍ 25-34 years old
- ❍ 35-44 years old
- ❍ 45-54 years old
- ❍ 55-64 years old
- ❍ 65-74 years old
- ❍ 75 years or older

Thank you!

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me for this research. Again, the interview should take about 60 minutes, but no longer than 90 minutes of your time. I want to remind you that I will record this interview so that I am certain to capture our conversation accurately.

DEFINE ENGAGEMENT
Engagement is a term used to describe some public relations activities.

1. How do you define engagement?
   Prompt
   -Would you describe it as process-oriented, outcome-oriented, or something else?
   -What synonyms would you use?
   -How does engagement relate to interaction?
   -How does engagement relate to relationships?

2. Is engagement something that you do in your position? Explain.

ENGAGING PUBLICS
We just spent time defining engagement. Now I want you describe what engagement looks like.

3. What do you call the people that your organization engages with (stakeholder, public, audience, etc.?)

4. What does engaging your (stakeholder groups) look like? Explain.
   Prompt
   -How does this differ based on the stakeholder group? Explain.
   - Describe the channel(s)/method(s) used to engage your groups.
      - How does the channel/method differ based on the stakeholder group? Explain.
   -What is your role in engaging?
   -What is the (stakeholder's role) in engaging?

5. What affects or influences how you engage with them? Explain.
   Prompt
   How does the type of relationship influence the level of engagement? Explain.

6. How do you decide if your engagement efforts are successful? Explain.
   Prompt
   -Through formal research?
   -Informal research?
   -What do your organization's leaders consider successful engagement?

RESEARCH CONSULTANCY

Sometimes there is a disconnect between how researchers describe a term in the field and how practitioners describe a term in the field.

7. When you want to understand new practice strategies in the field, where do seek that information? Why?
   Prompt
   -How often is academic research an influence? Explain.

INTERVIEWEE AS CUSTOMER

Finally, I want you to remove your "work hat" and I want you to put yourself into the role of consumer of your favorite product (food item, clothing, vacation spot, whatever).

8. How do you think the organization defines engagement? Explain.
   Prompt
   -In what ways does the organization attempt to engage with you? Explain.
   -What is the impact of how frequently or infrequently they do it?
   -Does the organization know you by name?

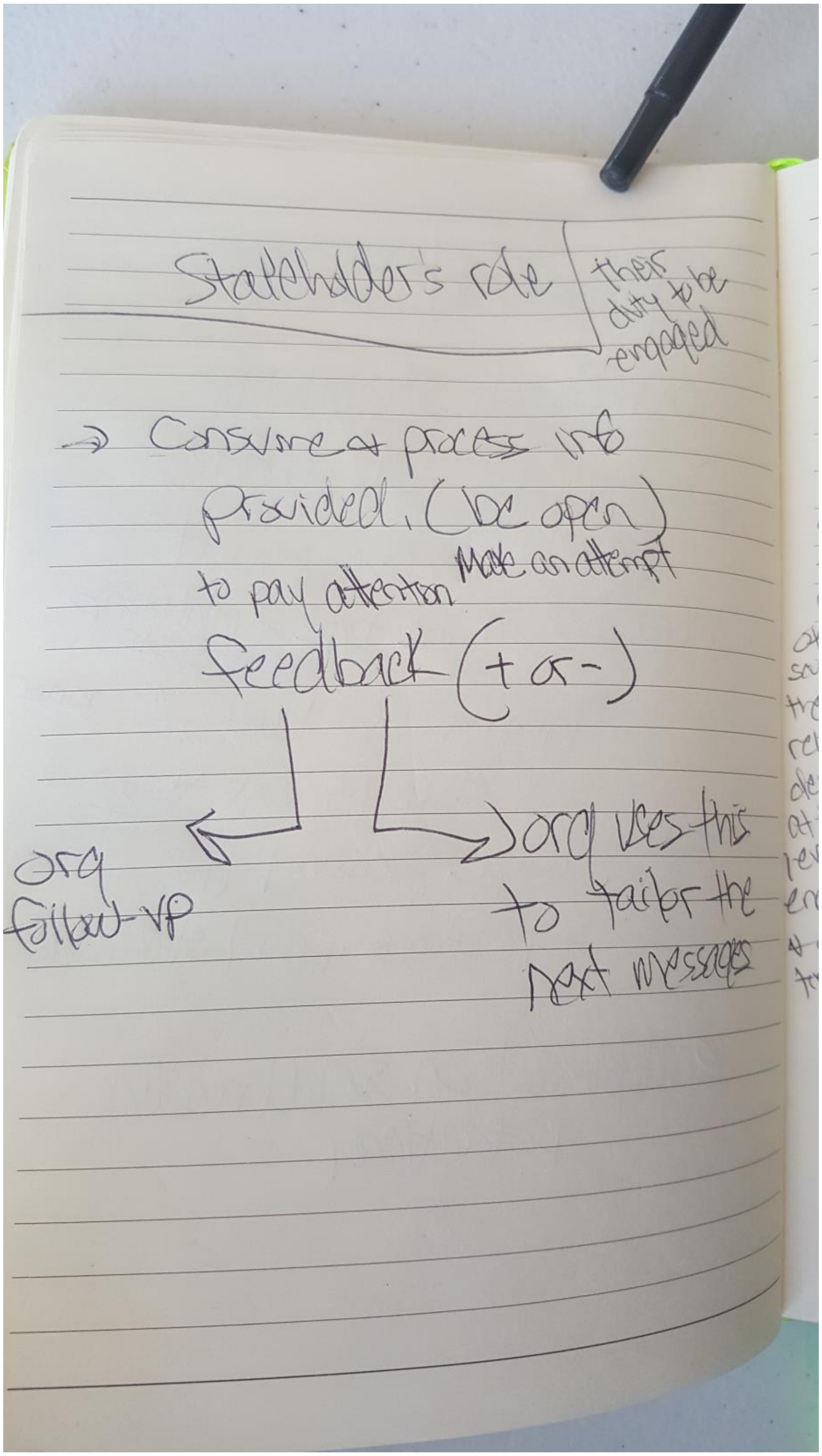
9. What do you consider as successful engagement by this organization? Explain.
   In what ways do you engage with the organization? Explain.
   Prompt
   -Who should initiate engagement?

10. What are the similarities in how you defined engagement earlier and how you describe it in your role as consumer? Explain.
    Prompt
    -What are the differences? Explain.

Thank you for sharing your views with me.

1. Is there anything that we missed in our conversation?
2. Is it ok if I contact you again if I need clarification on something we've discussed or have another question?
3. Finally, is there another practitioner whom you might recommend whose insight would be equally valuable for this study?

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE JOTTING OF STAKEHOLDER'S ROLE IN ENGAGING



APPENDIX D: STUDY PARTICIPANT FOLLOW-UP

RE: UNC-CH PR research needs your help

[redacted]

Mon 2/13/2017 11:05 AM

To:Mahin, Stephanie <stephanie_mahin@unc.edu>;

Hi Stephanie:

Hope you're doing well too. Below are my responses to your follow-up questions. Hope this is helpful.

Amy

From: Mahin, Stephanie [mailto:stephanie_mahin@unc.edu]
Sent: Monday, February 13, 2017 10:35 AM
To: [redacted]
Subject: Re: UNC-CH PR research needs your help

Hi Amy,

Hope you have been well.

I wanted to thank you again for your interview. You provided some incredibly rich information about engagement! I am still working through all of the interview data. There are two questions seem to continue to come up as I read through everything.

You seemed open to me following up with you. So in your opinion,

1) What is the difference between communication and engagement?
In general terms, I believe communication is about sending people information, i.e. one-way, not necessarily focused on creating dialogue. Engagement is about engaging the community, staff or customers in problem solving or decision making. Engagement focuses more on "listening" to what your audience wants from you, asking their opinions, etc.

On social media, analytics measure engagement specifically relating to followers taking some action with what you're posting. Not merely scrolling through their news feed, but actively doing something with your post (responding, sharing, liking, etc.). I believe there's value in tracking awareness as well as engagement on social media platforms.

2) What's NOT engagement?
One-way communication. You're telling people something, but you're not really giving them the opportunity to easily "do" something with that information – be it respond back to you, forward it along with comments to their social networks, etc. You're not asking them to

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