Excellence Theory in Public Relations: 
Social Media and Symmetrical Communication Model
Chang Bi (Nicky)

Quantitative Research Methods

Kent State University

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Introduction

Excellence Theory is the foundation theory in public relations. It aimed to examine public relations roles in organizations. The theory also discussed the internal and external environment management that argued organizations have to maintain a good relationship with their stakeholders and their employees. The theory also examined the public relations roles in strategic management and women’s difficulty of entering into a strategic management role. It introduced symmetrical communication model to increase customers’ satisfaction with organizations.

In previous study, scholars focused on the public relations strategic management roles, and thorough retested and examined Excellence Theory through interviewing public relations professionals and capturing their experience of their jobs. Some critical public relations defined excellence as an idea theory that it could not conform to the real public relations practice. Therefore, I will examine whether symmetrical communication would enhance the relationship between an organization and its publics. What’s more, previous studies mentioned new media made symmetrical communication get easier. The statement is reasonable because new media, especially social media, will make organization more transparent. Therefore, I will also test whether social media will make symmetrical communication get easier based on the Excellence Theory.
Theory

Excellence Theory was an integrated collection of theories (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008) that developed from 1970s to 1980s by James E. Grunig, Larissa A. Grunig, and David M. Dozier. It was a 15 years study sponsored by International Association of Business Communicators Research Foundation. The theory was tested through interviewing “heads of public relations, CEOs, and employees in 327 organizations,” (Grunig, 2008, p. 1) including corporations, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and associations in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2008) defined a set of contributes of public relations functions that can enhance effectiveness of an organization. They defined “excellence in public relations as a set of attributes and practices that helped to build quality, long-term relationships with strategic constituencies” (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Ehling, 1992, p. 86; as reviewed in J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008, p. 328).

Before public relations Excellence Theory was developed, very few studies could connect public relations practice with organizations’ behavior (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008). Scholars described the relationship between public relations role and behavior of an organization through mass communication theories of media effects, attitude theories from social psychology (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008), and other relevant studies. In 1966, J. Grunig tried to use situational theory he developed and organizational theory to explain, “how an organization’s structure, environment, history, size, and technology affect the practice of public relations” (Gruning, 1966;

Excellence Theory argued public relations could help an organization to adapt its internal and external environment that allowed it to behave the way it wanted (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008, p. 331). The theory also examined public relations practitioners’ role in organizations. According to J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2008), public relations assisted organizations in strategic decision-making that proved the practitioners were in a strategic management role in behavioral management. Beyond a strategic management role, J. Grunig and L. Grunig (2008) also explained senior public relations executives had to become “a member of the dominant coalition of the organization” (p. 335) and had a power to influence the decision-making of the organization. What’s more, the head of public relations department must be a strategic manager not an administrative manager (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008) or other managers from other departments to lead public relations programs or champions.

The excellence study also introduced symmetrical communication that could better manage the relationship between both internal and external environment and organizations. Symmetrical communication also showed that it increased organizations’ employees’ satisfaction (Grunig, 2008) with their jobs and with the organizations, enhanced public participation, managed the conflict (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008) with diverse publics as well.

Another important attribute of excellent theory is diversity. It represents categories of people based on differences, like age, race, sexual orientation, religion, and so on (Sha & Ford, 2007; as reviewed in Toth, 2007). The Excellent Theory also
discussed models of public relations, evaluation of public relations, employee
communication, social responsibility, and global public relations (Grunig, 2008).
Over all, the Excellence Theory constructed a set of theories that could prove public
relations’ contributes in organizational effectiveness (J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008).

Pervious Study

Public Relations Role

Public relations role is a main part of Excellence Theory. Excellence Theory
argued that public relations played a management role in organization, which received
widespread acceptance (Laskin, 2009) in both academic and professional fields.
Laskin (2009) explained that public relations is valuable for communication,
contributed to strategic planning, and “overall strategies” (p. 41) in an organization.

Linda Hon (2007)’s study examined the experiences of James and Larissa
Grunig’s former students that related to Excellence Theory. It tried to find out “the
empowerment of the public relations function, roles, organization of the
communication function, and models of public relations” (p. 5). The research was
conducted through out large organizations including public relations agencies,
government, corporations, nonprofits and so on. The results showed public relations
did play a strategic management role in most organizations and public relations aimed
to manage the relationship between organizations and their environment. The study
also argued that several practitioners help their organizations to implement two-way
symmetry because organizations concerned more about their “transparency, corporate
social responsibility, and the importance of getting feedback” (p. 14).

**Symmetrical Communication**

Symmetrical communication is a significant part of Excellence Theory. Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined public relations as “management of communication between an organization and its publics,” (p. 6, as reviewed in Laskin, 2009, p. 38) and public relations maintained the relationship between organizations and its publics.

Public relations developed through following four steps. The first step is press agent/publicity model (Laskin, 2009), which represents press agent play an important role in public relations industry at that time. Public information model (Grunig and Hunt, 1984) comes the second. Instead of press agents, public information dominated (Laskin, 2009) in public relations practice. It concerned about public’s value and interest, and aimed to tell the truth (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). The third model was two-way asymmetric model (Laskin, 2009) that developed before the forth model, two-way symmetric model (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Asymmetric model viewed public relations as a “scientific endeavor and introduced persuasion and other social science concepts in to practice of public relations” (Laskin, 2009, p. 38). On the contrary, two-way symmetric model encourage an “open dialogue” (Laskin, 2009, p. 40) between organizations and their publics.

According to Laskin (2009), the last two models both focused on two directions of communication and concerned both listening and talking. However, symmetrical communication aimed to build an equal environment among organizations and public,
instead of persuading publics to accept (Laskin, 2009) organization’s perspective as asymmetrical communication advocated.

Two-way Symmetrical Communication Criticism

Criticism of Excellence Theory identified the theory as “modernist, functionalist, and positivist” and as a theory only served “interest of management of organizations” (L’Etang & Preczka, 1996; Neilson, 2011; as reviewed in J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 2008, p. 328) but not publics.

Excellence team defined two-way symmetrical communication as a “normative ideal” (Grunig et al., 2002, p. 310) theory. However, criticism pointed that two-way symmetrical model is a “utopian ideal” (Kunczik, 1994; Pieczka, 1995; L’Etang, 1995; as reviewed in Laskin, 2009, p. 45) and “purely academic concept” (Dover, 1995; as reviewed in Laskin, 2009, p. 45). They doubted that whether two-way symmetrical model can truly help public relations practice. Although two-way symmetrical model tries to create an equal environment between organizations and publics, the two are nearly never stand in “equal positions” (Stauber and Pampton, 1995; as reviewed in Laskin, 2009, p. 45). Therefore, two-way symmetrical communication will never be achieved in the real world. Previous studies showed that Excellence Theory is a guideline that public relations practitioner would like to follow, but could not actually do (Laskin, 2009).

However, Grunig (2002) responded the criticism that they never said symmetrical communication could achieve based on catering stakeholders’ interest by scarifying
organization’s interests. Symmetrical is also not the opposite of asymmetrical  (as reviewed in Laskin, 2009). Therefore, Grunig believed symmetrical communication has its realistic basis.

**Social Media and Symmetrical Communication**

Grunig argued in the 2010 speech at the PRSA Conference that social media might “make it more possible than ever to achieve our goals in terms of relationships with stakeholders” (as reviewed in Waddington, p. 4). According to Waddington (2013), social media makes an organization neither has to create content, nor own the “conversation around its products or services” (p. 6), and the messages will spread widely and speedy. On the Internet, the audiences automatically engage into the conversation, and share and information of an organization. Therefore, social media makes symmetrical communication get easier (Hon, 2007; as reviewed in Toth, 2007).

However, According to Bridgen (as reviewed in Waddington, 2013), social media did not change anything. He argued that comments from publics on a Facebook page would not conform to Grunig's Excellence Theory. He explained that “it is only symmetrical communication if the organization engages but it is unlikely to be a symmetrical relationship” (as reviewed in Waddington, 2013, p. 7) because of asymmetric information and resources.
**Future Research**

Many researchers examined how two-way symmetrical communication would enhance the relationship between an organization and its stakeholders. On one hand, some studies agreed that Excellence Theory could enhance the public relations functions in increasing effectiveness of an organization (Grunig et al., 2002). On the other hand, criticism argued that recourses were so unequal (Leitch and Neilson, 2001; as reviewed in Laskin, 2009) that made organizations easy to take advantages (Stauber and Rampton, 1995; as reviewed in Laskin, 2009) from their stakeholders. Therefore, symmetrical communication seemed never be achieved in practical public relations. Previous scholars also explained that Excellence Theory is an ideal theory (Laskin, 2009) that organizations rarely to use because they have to sacrifice their interests.

Therefore, my research will aim to explore whether symmetrical communication will improve the relationship between organizations and their publics.

In order to find out the correlation of the relationship of organizations and their publics and two-way symmetrical communication, we must choose a symmetrical communication model. In previous study, it showed that social media makes symmetrical communication get easier, although some scholars against that social media could not change anything because the existing of unequal position of organizations and their publics. Considering that social media is a typical medium that improves the implement of symmetrical communication, we use social media as the model to test two-way symmetrical communication based on the Excellence Theory.
Currently, social media offers organizations an open platform to build
relationship with their publics. It also makes organizations more transparent, such as in crisis management. Therefore, social media becomes the most important channel and one of most efficient tools to communicate organizations’ situation. Using social media efficiently also becomes one of criteria when we evaluate and measure the success of public relations champions or programs. Moreover, audience’s engagement via social media makes organizations efficiently enhance their brands’ awareness, interest, and desire. Therefore, the study aims to explore that whether social media gives organizations opportunities to actually implement symmetrical communication.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Considering that public relations is a subject that manage the relationship between organization and public, we have to identify what element can influence the relationship between the two via social media. I will use Michaelson and Stacks (2011)’s standardized measures of organization’s outcomes for public relations activities, which includes awareness, interest, desire, action, and advocacy, to examine whether social media can improve the relationship. Other measures that can prove the improvement of the relationship (dependent variable) will be whether customers believe organizations are transparent, trustworthy, and whether they concern about public’s interest.

The control group will be one-way model and two-way asymmetrical model. I will use informed media, such as newspaper and emails to contrast with social media
to test audience’s attitude toward organizations. Therefore, I will code transparency, trustworthy, concern, awareness, interest, desire, action, and advocacy as dependent variables that represent the improvement of the relationship. The independent variable will be using social media, and using newspaper and emails.

The research question will be:

QR1: Can Social media improve the relationship between an organization and its public?

QR2: Does social media give organizations opportunities to actually implement symmetrical communication?

Based on the literature review, we found that social media will improve the process of symmetrical communication because social media may balance the relationship between the two. Therefore, the hypothesis would be:

H1: People believe organization is more transparent if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media rather than newspaper and emails.

H2: People would like to choose the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media rather than newspaper and emails.

H3: People would like to recommend the organization’s brand/product/service to my friends if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media rather than newspaper and emails.

H4: By using social media, to the extent people think the organization is more transparent, they think the organization is more trustworthy.
H5: By using social media, to the extent people think the organization is trustworthy, they are more interested in the organization’s brand/product/service.

H6: By using social media, to the extent people think the organization is trustworthy, they are more likely to purchase/try/support the organization’s brand/product/service.

Methodology

An online survey will be adopted. Considering that social media is a medium based on Internet, the participants of the survey will come from the Internet. Therefore, an online survey will conform to the research.

There is one independent variable with two conditions that are using social media or using informed media (newspaper, email) to maintain the relationship between an organization and its customers. In the each two condition, I will compare the mean scores of transparency, trustworthy, concern, awareness, interest, desire, action, and advocacy. The online survey (Table 1) contains 16 statements to ask participants to indicate the extent to which they agree with each statement. The participants can use numbers from one to seven to represent strongly disagree, mostly disagree, slightly disagree, neither agree nor disagree, slightly agree, mostly agree, strongly agree.

Statistical Procedures

I will use independent samples t test via SPSS to test H1 through H3. I will test the significant of two independent variables (using social media, using newspaper and
email). For each two statements that identify the same measure, such as transparent, the t-test will compare the mean score of two conditions. If p value less than .05, it means the mean scores of statements about using social media will be significantly higher than the mean scores of statements about using newspaper and emails. Take H1 for example, the mean scores of the statement “I think the organization is more transparent if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media,” must be significant higher than the mean scores of statement “I think the organization is more transparent if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails”. It also shows H1 is supported. I will use the same method to test H2 and H3.

Secondly, I will conduct a multiple regression analysis through SPSS to test H4 through H6. For example, H4 states, “by using social media, to the extent people think the organization is more transparent, they think the organization is more trustworthy”. The predictor will be the score of transparent, and the dependent variable will be the score of trustworthy. If the value of $\beta$ is positive and between .20 and .70, and $p < .05$, the hypothesis is supported. It means thinking organization’s transparency that has a significant and positive correlation with thinking that the organization is trustworthy. If value of $\beta$ is negative, the hypothesis is not supported. If the value of $p > .05$, the hypothesis is not supported. It means thinking organization’s transparency that has no significant correlation with thinking that the organization is trustworthy. The standardized beta, standard error of beta, and tolerance also need to be reported. The same method will be used in testing H5 and H6.
Conclusion

Based on previous study of Excellence Theory. In the study, I will examine whether symmetrical communication would enhance the relationship between an organization and its publics, and whether social media gives organizations opportunities to actually implement symmetrical communication. An online survey will be adopted. It will test whether organization will maintain a good relationship with its customers via social media considering organization’s transparency, trustworthy, concern, and brands/products/services’ awareness, interest, desire, action, and advocacy.
Table 1: Social Media and Relationship Survey

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement below by circling a number between 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Mostly disagree</th>
<th>Slightly disagree</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor disagree</th>
<th>Slightly agree</th>
<th>Mostly agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I think the organization is more transparent if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>2. I think the organization is trustworthy if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>3. I think the organization concerns my interest if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. I will remember the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>5. I’m interested in the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>6. I would like to choose the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media.</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>7. I would like to purchase/try/support the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via social media.</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>8. I would like to recommend the organization’s brand/product/service to my friends if it maintains a relationship with</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>I think the organization is more transparent if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails.</td>
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<td>10.</td>
<td>I think the organization is trustworthy if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails.</td>
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<td>11.</td>
<td>I think the organization concerns my interest if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails.</td>
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<td>12.</td>
<td>I will remember the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails.</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>I’m interested in the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails.</td>
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<td>14.</td>
<td>I would like to choose the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails.</td>
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<td>15.</td>
<td>I would like to purchase/try/support the organization’s brand/product/service if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails.</td>
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<td>16.</td>
<td>I would like to recommend the organization’s brand/product/service to my friends if it maintains a relationship with its customers via newspaper or emails.</td>
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