

Strategic Involvement without Strategic Input: An Empirical Analysis of the Practice of Public Relations in Greece

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to empirically examine the practice of public relations in Greece and assess the extent to which practitioners strategically manage and contribute to the strategic management of organizations. Moreover, the study aims to reveal differences in the public relations practices across various industry sectors. Towards this end, an online survey was conducted to examine the views of 75 public relations practitioners from various business sectors in Greece. Findings indicate that most of the public relations functions examined exhibit a considerable amount of strategic focus as practitioners participate in the strategic management processes of organizations and have a say in senior management although their input is far from strategic. Moreover, they support the organizational strategy by practising two-way asymmetrical models, focusing on positive publicity, and marketing communications and employing prescriptive communication strategies. Nonetheless, they do not engage to a great extent in formal and informal research, active listening, and outcome evaluation. Thus, public relations practitioners in Greece support organizational goals and enterprise strategy by acting as strategic advisors of the senior management and operational supporters through the implementation of communication strategies. The low response rate of the survey limits the generalizability of the findings of our study, which aims to provide preliminary insights about the under researched Greek practice of public relations. The originality of the study stems from the alternative measurement tools proposed to evaluate strategic public relations and the emphasis on cross-sectional analysis.

Keywords: public relations, Greece, industry sectors, strategic management, strategic communication, practitioners

1. INTRODUCTION

The increasing importance of social, political, environmental, and ethical issues for contemporary businesses has given prominence to the strategic management paradigm in public relations (Steyn, 2009). The strategic management paradigm has been proposed as an alternative approach to the symbolic-interpretative model which suggests that public relations mainly adopt a top-down one-way communication strategy approach to convey messages of the decision-makers. On the other hand, the strategic management paradigm focuses on the empowerment of public relations in the strategic decision-making process, enabling managers to formulate better informed decisions and balance the interests between the management and the public (Tam et al., 2022). From this perspective strategic public relations/communication can be seen as an amalgam of communication processes aiming at building, presenting, and rebuilding strategy (Van Ruler, 2018).

The origins of strategic public relations can be traced back to the study called Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management, which was conducted by Grunig and his colleagues (Grunig et al., 2002) and sponsored by the IABC foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (henceforth the Excellence Study). In their view, strategic public relations are planned activities that should be evaluated and aligned with organizational goals, with public relations managers being involved in the strategic management process (Grunig and Grunig, 2000). Several studies have operationalized the strategic orientation of public relations using the four generic principles of the Excellence Study, namely: involvement in strategic management, empowerment in the dominant coalition or direct relationship with top management, use of two-way symmetrical communication, and enactment of the managerial role (Rhee, 1999; Lim et al., 2005; Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014; Anani-Bossman, 2021).

Moss et al. (2000) identified the following as key elements of strategic public relations management: the reporting relationship of the public relations manager to the senior management; the environmental scanning activities; the advisory role to the senior manager; the development and implementation of communication strategies; and involvement in the strategy-making process of the organization. Based on the work of Steyn (2009) on the South African practice of public relations, Steyn and Niemann (2014) suggested that the strategic public relations orientation is comprised of two basic dimensions namely, the PR strategist or reflective strategist role, and the strategy formulation dimension. The PR strategist role is related to (a) the development and execution of a public relations program that addresses the overarching goals of the organization, (b) the formulation of a mixture of prescriptive (based on organizational goals) and emergent communication strategies (based on the changing societal needs), and (c) the counselling offered by public relations managers to other senior managers. Moreover, the strategy formulation dimension emphasizes the involvement of the public relations function in the strategic management process of the organization and co-creation of the enterprise strategy along with other senior managers by providing input from environmental scanning, thus enhancing the organization's social responsibility and legitimacy.

In the above conceptualization of strategic public relations management, strategic communication scholars have added several other elements. Tam et al. (2022) suggested that strategic public relations managers are those that are frequently invited to top management meetings and strategic planning (Tam et al., 2022). Bowen (2006) indicated that public relations can contribute to the maximum level in strategic management when they have enough autonomy as a function and are not supervised by another function such as marketing. To the strategic role of public relations Verhoeven et al. (2011) added mainly inbound activities but also outbound activities (but to a lower degree), helping organizations support their goals. Inbound activities are related to the reflective role of public relations and include efforts for managing relationships with stakeholders, crisis communication, and the identification of communication opportunities. Outbound activities are associated with building the brand and corporate image, reputation, and communicating with customers and employees. Within this perspective, Zerfass and Volk (2018) regard that communicating with journalists, opinion leaders and influencers conveys the strategic goals of the organization to various shareholders, thus upgrading the strategic value of public relations.

Despite their strategic role, public relations/communication departments are still not considered an essential function in organizations due mainly to the fact that top managers and communication directors have yet not understood the nature and extent of public relations departments' involvement in strategic management (Moss et al, 2000; Zerfass and Volk, 2018). Moreover, the existing theoretical or empirical conceptualizations of strategic public relations management have emphasized different facets of the practice, while there is a lack of holistic measurements pertaining to strategic focus that can be applied by researchers and practitioners alike. Furthermore, existing frameworks do not take into consideration the strategy building contribution of public relations, ignore the implementation of emergent strategies, put less emphasis on the operational activities of public relations that help the

organizations pursue their strategic goals (Zerfass et al., 2018), and do not take into consideration the impact of industry and environmental conditions on the degree of strategic public relations orientation. In addition, there is a lack of studies regarding the strategic role of public relations in Southern European countries (Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014; García, 2015) such as Greece. Although the public relations industry has reached a stage of maturity (Papatriantafyllou, 2008), indigenous PR research has lagged considerably behind (Theofilou and Watson, 2014).

Given the above research gaps, the aim of the present study is four-fold. First to develop a holistic tool, that is an index, for the measurement of the strategic role of public relations through the lenses of the strategic communication theory and strategic management of public relations. This index will provide an alternative measurement tool used by public relations practitioners and top managers to analyze the status of public relations departments and recognize their strategic value. Second, to measure the strategic role of public relations by taking into consideration the most important facets of the practice, such as the autonomy of the department, the strategic activities performed, the public relations model, the empowerment of the function in the strategic processes of the organization, research, evaluation, and the communication strategy. Third, to test the impact of the industry on the strategic orientation of public relations and highlight differences in the strategic focus of public relations departments across business sectors, and fourth to apply the proposed measurement tool to analyze the strategic practice of public relations in Greece.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Strategic public relations/communication

To understand the practice of public relations in Greece we will draw upon the literature on strategic communication and strategic public relations management. As Tam et al. (2022) note, empowerment of public relations and communication in the strategic management of organizations can enhance the strategic orientation and legitimacy performance of organizations. In the present study the multi-faceted role of strategic public relations can be organized around four dimensions: (a) position and purpose of public relations, (b) public relations models, (c) influence on and relationship with senior management, and (d) planning.

2.1.1. Strategic activities and purpose

Strategic public relations should not only focus on supporting marketing communications campaigns or communicating information about the organization to the public but also needs to emphasize building organizational reputation, managing issues associated with social responsibility (Gregory, 2020) and contributing to the society through philanthropic initiatives (Singh et al., 2021). Thus, strategic public relations cultivates mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and various strategic stakeholders, tries to avoid and eliminate the risks associated with the corporate reputation and addresses societal issues that affect the public (Steyn, 2007). Emphasis on social responsibility is related to the social exchange perspective (Memon and Ghani, 2020) and the reflective dimension of European public relations, which aims among other things to analyze social trends and adapt the organization's strategy and value to meet these trends (Verčič et al., 2001).

Gregory (2020) also points out that in order to understand how public relations is practised one should examine where the function of public relations is situated within an organizational structure. Public relations will have a strategic role as an institutionalized management function located in organizational structure that integrates and coordinates all communication functions and not be a subordinated function to departments such as marketing or human resources (Grunig and Grunig, 1998). Prior literature has shown that public relations in organizations is mainly a tactical function, treated as part of the marketing department or regarded as a publicity service (Moss et al., 1996). From a European perspective, public relations is nowadays positioned as an independent management function within organizations under the titles "corporate communication", "strategic communication", or "communication management", in an attempt to avoid the highly criticized term 'public relations' (Zerfass et al., 2011).

2.1.2. Public Relations Models

Strategic communication and public relations is more than the one-way communication model and puts emphasis on two-way models (Van Ruler, 2018). According to Grunig et al. (1995) one-way communication models such as the press agency and public information aim at disseminating neutral information to the public or at producing positive publicity while eliminating negative information. On the other hand, the two-way asymmetrical model utilizes research to understand public attitudes to influence the public in an effective way. The two-way symmetrical model focuses on research in order

to adapt the organizational behaviour to the public's needs and desires. Tam et al. (2022) note that the strategic management paradigm of public relations suggests that one-way models need to co-exist with two-way communication models that enable dialogue between the public and the organization and foster the development of mutually beneficial relationships. Thus, it is expected that public relations departments which are excellent and strategically managed try to inform while also listening and responding to stakeholders (Verčič and Zerfass, 2016).

2.1.3. Influence on and relationship with senior management

Strategic communication is related to the communication efforts of an organization to fulfil its mission (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 3). Thus, public relations aims at conveying the corporate strategy to important stakeholders for organizational survival (Zerfass and Volk, 2018) and communicating a set of predefined strategic decisions (Moss and Warnaby, 1998). In this perspective, public relations align the communication strategy with the corporate strategy and formulate communication goals to achieve the organizational goals (Steyn and Niemann, 2014). Hence, public relations is partly strategic and in line with the communication of strategy through the implementation of communication programs (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Another important facet of strategic public relations lies in its contribution to organizational strategy formulation (Van Ruler, 2020). As Verčič and Zerfass (2016) note, the contribution to strategic management could be indirect through the advisory influence of communication managers as well as direct by exerting executive influence. More specifically, public relations executives exercise *advisory influence* when they make recommendations to senior management and act as internal consultants, while they engage in executive influence, a more direct form, when they participate in senior management meetings during the strategic planning process, when they shape strategic decisions at the organizational level (Rebel and Berger, 2006) about the development of new policies, strategies, procedures, and programs, and when they engage in discussions about major problems and issues (Broom and Dozier, 1986). Thus, the empowerment of public relations in the strategic management of organization can be related to (a) counselling activities through which the head of public relations helps senior managers make more informed decisions by informing them about the reactions of the public, communication problems and opportunities (Gregory, 2020), (b) operational activities that focus on communicating the organizational strategy to strategic members of the public, and (c) strategic activities, by participating in the strategic decision making processes and meetings at the organizational level. These three types of public relations empowerment in strategic management represent a continuum ranging from supportive, operational, to decisional and strategic (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Moreover, a strategic approach to public relations is reflected in the relationship between the head of public relations function and the senior management. Public relations managers need to communicate with senior management (Cardwell et al., 2017) and offer them input as boundary spanners of the external environment either through access to the dominant coalition or maintaining a direct relationship with the CEO or Chairperson of the organization (Tam et al., 2022). In contrast, a tactical approach to public relations is assumed to exist when the head of public relations reports to the marketing manager.

2.1.4. Research and Evaluation

In its basic form, strategic communication is related to the strategic communication management (Zerfass et al., 2018). Thus, public relations/communication needs to be a carefully planned activity. According to Steyn (2007), at the functional level, strategic public relations managers formulate and execute public relations plans and programs. Based on the Excellence Study, public relations departments can contribute to strategic management when they perform formal research (e.g., news clipping) as well as informal research with key stakeholders (e.g., informal interviews) and environmental scanning techniques (Grunig and Grunig, 2020). Moreover, effective evaluation is an integral part of a strategic approach in public relations. Macnamara and Gregory (2018) point out that a strategic orientation in public relations is reflected in the extent to which practitioners emphasize organizational listening to the public by assessing the outcomes and the impact of organizational decisions on strategic members of the public (e.g., awareness, attitudes, behaviour) besides the output evaluation of the public relations efforts. They further note that this strategic evaluation could be conducted through quantitative (surveys) as well as qualitative techniques (e.g., focus groups, interviews).

2.1.5. Communication Strategy

Communication strategy formulation and implementation is also an integral part of the strategic management process of public relations. Practitioners that formulate their strategy based solely on

intuition and subjective knowledge without formal research and evaluation are not performing strategic public relations/communication. Researchers have also pointed out that the alignment of the communication strategy with the organizational goals as well as stakeholders' interests is a central element of strategic communication management (Volk and Zerfass, 2018). In general, practitioners may choose to develop either a "prescriptive" communication strategy through ad hoc planning aligned with organizational goals, thus contributing to the effectiveness of organizational strategy or a more "emergent" strategy that promotes the interests of the organization and stakeholders as well (Steyn, 2007) by incorporating research of publics, environmental scanning of social issues, active listening, and the participation of stakeholders in the formulation process (Toledano, 2018).

2.2. Industry and Public Relations

The industry/sector of an organization can shape the practice of public relations in a given country according to its own distinct characteristics (Gregory, 2020). For example, Moss et al. (1996), investigating the UK retail and consumer goods sector, found that public relations mainly has a product publicity function with a strong marketing orientation. Moreover, public relations is usually practised through one-way and two-way asymmetrical models. Valentini (2012), examining organizations in the Italian public sector, found that public relations had an operational rather than a strategic function and that mixed public relations models were practised. In Ghana, financial services companies emphasized interpersonal relationships and public relations practitioners exhibited low involvement in strategic management of their organization as they had a reporting relationship with the CEO but were not members of the dominant coalition (Anani-Bossman and Mudzanani, 2020). In addition, they were less likely to be advisors of the senior management. In the European Communication Monitor survey in 2019 excellent public relations departments that were likely to perform strategic public relations originated mainly from joint-stock companies as well as non-profit organizations, while governmental organizations exhibited the lowest scores on excellence (European Communication Monitor, 2019). Thus, it is herein assumed that there will be cross-sectional differences with respect to the practice of public relations in Greece.

2.3. Greek-related Literature on Public Relations

Scientific research is still in its infancy and there is a lack of studies regarding the current practice of public relations by Greek companies (Yannas, 2004). The scant research on public relations in Greece has focused on the history and current state of the profession (Theofilou and Watson, 2014; Yannas, 2004), the use of the internet by public relations professionals (Kitchen and Panopoulos, 2010; Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2014), the role of public relations managers in consumer product companies (Panigyrakis, 2015), as well as gender-related differences of public relations practitioners (Panigyrakis and Veloutsou, 1998; Panigyrakis and Poulis, 2009), and female public relations professionals (Triantafillidou and Yannas, 2021).

In 1991, Anastasia Lyra conducted research regarding the practice of public relations in Greece (Grunig et al., 1995). Results suggested that public relations practitioners were regarded as communication technicians who mainly used the press agency and public information models. They did not conduct research and practised marketing public relations. In addition, the personal influence and cultural interpreter models were more likely to be practised by public relations practitioners of Greek organizations. Specifically, practitioners relied on their personal relationships with key contacts such as journalists and politicians. An interesting finding of this study was that only a small percentage of public relations practitioners were regarded as strategic managers who practised two-way symmetrical public relations. These findings were also noted by Panigyrakis and Veloutsou (1998), who found that public relations practitioners working for the consumer goods industries performed mostly technical tasks like writing, editing, organizing special events, working with the media and speaking, whereas more managerial activities like programming or researching were less frequently practised. More recently, Triantafillidou and Yannas (2021) have reported that female public relations managers in Greece are often underestimated by senior management in their organizations due to the low importance they attach to the public relations function.

Before examining the way public relations in Greece is currently practised, special attention should be paid to the broader environment in which it operates. Although the effect of the American model of public relations is evident in the case of Greece (Theofilou and Watson, 2014) its implementation is questionable. According to García (2014) the prevalence of small and medium-sized companies and the high power-distance culture of Greece, which supports centralized and authoritarian styles of organizational structure, leave no room for the practice of the two-way symmetrical model, which requires both the public and the organization to change their behaviour in order to develop win-win relationships. The dominance of clientelism is also another characteristic of the Greek environment

that has had a profound impact on the practice of excellent public relations, as practitioners tend to focus on the cultivation of personal relationships with politicians and the media for the provision of favours and positive media coverage (García, 2015). Hence, it is expected that public relations departments of companies operating in Greece are not ideal candidates for strategic public relations.

3. METHODOLOGY

To address the study’s objectives and develop a measurement tool for the strategic role in public relations an online survey was conducted through a self-administered questionnaire to public relations/communication practitioners of organizations in Greece.

To assess the measurement model for the strategic role of public relations an index was formulated based on an extensive literature review which consisted of eight constructs, namely: strategic activities, autonomy, model of public relations, level of empowerment, reporting relationship with CEO, research, evaluation, and communication strategy (Table 1). The questions about autonomy, model of public relations, level of empowerment, reporting relationship with CEO, and communication strategy were developed after a careful review of previous conceptualizations of strategic public relations management (e.g., Valentini and Sriramesh, 2014; Moss et al., 2000; Steyn, 2009; Tam et al., 2022; Verhoeven et al., 2011; Zerfass and Volk, 2018; Zerfass et al., 2015). The items that comprised the construct strategic activities were adapted from Hutton et al. (2001), Kim and Reber (2008), Zerfass and Sherzada (2014), Tong and Chang (2020). The constructs of strategic research and strategic evaluation were adapted from Anani-Bossman and Tella (2017), Zerfass et al. (2017), Xavier et al. (2005), Gregory and Macnamara (2019).

Table 1. Variables of the Study

Construct	Measurement and Example items	Analysis
Autonomy of the department	The name of the department includes terms related to (1) Other functions (2) Marketing (3) Public Relations, Communication, Corporate Communications etc	Descriptive statistics (frequencies), chi-square test with industry sector
Strategic Activities (15 items – 5-point scales)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building and maintaining a positive image • Supporting marketing and product promotion campaigns • Cultivating relationships with the public, such as investors, the community, employees, NGOs, political organizations • Communicating during crisis • Positioning the stance of the organization on public matters • Implementing and communicating social responsibility activities • Building relationships with media representatives 	Descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations), exploratory factor analysis, reliability analysis, creation of composite scales, analysis of variance with industry sectors for each derived factor
Model of public relations (1: one-way, 2: two-way asymmetrical, 3: two-way symmetrical) (one best answer question)	Indicate the answer that best described their practice from the following list: (1) Communication in my organization is one-way and the organization aims mainly at informing the public. Communication activities are organized in such a way as to support organizational objectives. (2) Communication in my organization aims at informing the public and responding to their questions and complaints. Communication activities are organized in such a way as to support organizational objectives taking into consideration the needs of the public, and (3) Communication in my organization aims at informing the public, responding to their questions and complaints, while seeking the public’s input, which is incorporated in communication decisions and activities. The end-goal is to co-create communication with	Descriptive statistics (frequencies), chi-square test with industry sector

	the public.	
Level of empowerment (1: advisory, 2: operational, 3: strategic) (one best answer question)	Indicate which of the following three answers describes your role in the organization: (1) I advise senior managers about the public's reactions to organizational decisions, communication problems and opportunities, and other broad communication issues, (2) I am responsible for the communication of the corporate strategy and the development and implementation of public relations and communication programs, (3) I contribute to the strategic decision-making process of the organization as an active member, propose strategies and participate in meetings of the dominant coalition.	Descriptive statistics (frequencies), chi-square test with industry sector
Reporting relationship with senior manager (one best answer question) (responses 3 and 4 indicate a more strategic focus)	Indicate which of the four answers describes your relationship with the top management: (1) I report to the marketing manager (2) I have an indirect relationship with senior management. I mainly advise the CEO/chairperson/senior managers about public relations/communication issues. (3) I have a direct reporting relationship with the CEO or chairperson of the organization. (4) The CEO invites me to the senior management meetings.	Descriptive statistics (frequencies), chi-square test with industry sector
Strategic Research (6 items, 5-point scales)	(1) Internet analysis (2) Identification of trends through secondary sources (3) Content analysis of media coverage (4) Interviews with key stakeholders (5) Focus groups (6) Surveys with questionnaires	Descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations), analysis of variance with industry sectors, reliability analysis, creation of composite scale
Strategic Evaluation (6 items, 5-point scales)	(1) Web analysis and social media analytics (2) Output evaluation in terms of activities performed (3) Outcome evaluation in terms of changes in perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours (4) Qualitative and quantitative techniques	Descriptive statistics (mean scores and standard deviations), reliability analysis, creation of composite scale, analysis of variance with industry sectors
Communication Strategy (1: indicates lack of strategic focus, 2: indicates the use of a prescriptive strategy, and 3 & 4 indicate the usage of emergent strategies)	Indicate whether the communication strategy is formulated based on: (1) ideas of the public relations executives, (2) corporate goals, (3) corporate goals and research, and (4) active listening to the public and exchange of information with the public.	Descriptive statistics (frequencies), chi-square test with industry sector

Participants were also asked to answer questions about their gender, age, years of experience in public relations, the sector of their organization, the title of their department, the title of their position, the number of the organization's employees, and the number of employees that worked in their department.

A purposive sampling approach was used after developing a list of organizational emails. The list of emails was developed by utilizing other lists such as the 200 most profitable organizations in Greece for 2021, organizations and brands that received various business awards, organizations that were listed in the Athens Exchange Group, organizations that were advertised in ad books. The questionnaire was e-mailed during April 2022 to 840 Greek organizations with a notice to be completed by the head of the public relations/communication department. In total, 75 emails were returned, and the response rate was 8.9%, thus the representativeness of the population is not guaranteed. Similar response rates have been observed in other studies that target public relations practitioners (e.g., Porter and Sallot, 2005; Porter et al., 2009).

4. RESULTS

Table 2 shows the characteristics of the sample. Based on the findings, the majority of respondents are female (78.7%) aged between 36 and 55 years old (73.4%). Most of the practitioners are working for the retail and consumer goods industry and companies that sell products such as cars, motorcycles, cosmetics, clothing, etc (28%; 21). Several practitioners are working in the services sector, which comprises companies that offer consulting services, asset management, research and financial services (14.7%, 11), the energy, technology and industrial manufacturing sector (13.3%, 10), the entertainment, publications and sports sector (13.3%, 10), and in the food-beverage-hospitality sector (12%, 9). To a lesser extent organizations from the public sector (9.3%, 7) and the logistics and transportation sector (9.3%, 7) are represented in the sample. It should be noted that the organizations of the sample were either Greek companies or multinational companies with a Greek branch.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

Gender	Percentage	Industry	Percentage
Male	21.3%	Energy-technology-industrial manufacturing	13.3%
Female	78.7%	Food-Beverage and Hospitality	12.0%
		Public sector	9.3%
Age		Entertainment, publications, and sports sector	13.3%
18 to 35	12.0%	Retail and consumer goods	28.8%
36 to 45	34.7%	Services	14.7%
46 to 55	38.7%	Logistics and Transportation	9.3%
More than 56	14.7%		
Years of Experience		Size	
Less than 5 years	9.3%	Less than 49 employees (small)	23.0%
6 to 10 years	22.7%	50 to 249 employees (medium)	24.3%
More than 11 years	68.0%	More than 250 employees (large)	52.7%
Department size			
1 to 2 employees	52.1%		
3 to 10 employees	42.5%		
More than 11 employees	5.5%		

Most of the practitioners are regarded as senior practitioners given that they had been working in the field of public relations and communication for more than 11 years (68%). The majority of them are working in large organizations (more than 250 employees) (52.7%) and for small public relations/communication departments (1 to 2 employees) (52.1%).

4.1. Department Names

Table 3 shows the names of the respondents' departments. In general, the term "marketing" was found in the names of 26 departments, followed by the terms public relations (19 times), communications (15 times), and corporate communications (9 times). We mainly observed three types of departments: (a) departments that follow a marketing public relations orientation (40.5%), (b) departments that follow a corporate public relations orientation (51.4%), and (c) departments that integrate public relations in other departments such as the "human resources department" or the "operations departments" (8.1%). Marketing-oriented departments are those that integrate the functions of marketing and public relations. Most of these departments are named "marketing" (17.3%) and "marketing and communications" (8%). Other names found were "marketing and public relations or public relations and marketing" (4%), COM "marketing communications", "communications and marketing", "corporate communications and marketing services", "marketing communication, and digital strategy", "promotion and communications", "brand and communication", "consumer product division", and "commercial department". The majority of these departments originate from the retail and consumer goods industries and public relations acts as a supporting function of marketing

On the other hand, departments with a corporate public relations focus use names such as "public relations" (10.7%) and "communications" (9.3%). It seems that the Greek public relations industry has not been aligned with the European trend to abandon the term public relations and turn to the use of

other terms such as “corporate communications”. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) influenced the names of the departments with a corporate public relations focus. Six departments make use of the terms “sustainability”, “CSR”, and “responsibility” along with the terms “corporate communications” and “public relations”. Other names found to a lesser extent, were “corporate affairs” (2.7%), “communications and public relations” (2.7%), “corporate communication” (1.3%), “communications and public affairs” (1.3%), and “corporate communications and government relations” (1.3%). Emphasis on media relations was also observed in five departments as they used the terms “press office” and “media relations” in their names (5.3%). Interestingly, five departments with a corporate public relations focus incorporate in their names the term “publications” (e.g., public relations and publications) (5.3%). Three departments had a clear focus on external relations as they were named “external relations” or “international and public relations” (4%). Departments with a corporate public relations focus are popular among public organizations, and companies in the food-beverage-hospitality, entertainment-publications-sports sectors.

Table 3. Names of Departments

Marketing Public Relations	Corporate Public Relations	Other
Marketing (13)	Communications (7)	Human Resources (1)
Marketing and Communications (6)	Communications and Public Relations (1)	Management (5)
Marketing and Public Relations (1)	Communications and Public Affairs (1)	Operations (1)
Marketing Communications (1)	Corporate Communications (1)	
Marketing, Communication and Digital Strategy (1)	Corporate Communications & Sustainability (1)	
Communications and Marketing (1)	Corporate Communications and CSR (3)	
Corporate Communication Marketing Services (1)	Corporate Communications, CSR and Media Relations (2)	
Public Relations and Marketing (2)	Corporate communications and government relations (1)	
Promotion and Communications (1)	Public Relations (8)	
Brand and Communications (1)	Public Relations and Press Office (1)	
Consumer Product Division (1)	Public Relations and Publications (3)	
Commercial (1)	Publications, Events, and Public Relations (1)	
	Corporate Affairs (2)	
	Press offices (1)	
	Press office, Public Relations and CSR(1)	
	External Relations (1)	
	International and Public Relations (2)	

Table 1 shows that the Cronbach's Alpha score of LCOC 0.701 indicated that the LCOC variable was reliable. Hair et al. (2014) stated that the limit for Cronbach's Alpha was 0.6. The bivariate correlation analysis in Table 1 also suggests that the correlation between each LCOC indicator and the total LCOC scores had a significant effect. Hence, each LCOC question indicator was valid.

4.2. Strategic Activities

A fifteen-item scale was used to measure the practice of public relations in Greece in regard to its strategic activities for organizations. Then, an exploratory factor analysis was performed through the principal component method and the varimax rotation in order to identify possible clusters of related variables. Looking at the rotated component matrix we had to drop the item “promoting the organization through social media” as it loaded high in two factors. Thus, we re-ran the factor analysis with fourteen items. All variables had communalities above 0.4 and the factor loadings were above 0.55. Three factors emerged from the analysis capturing 64.8% of the total variance. The first factor was named “*positive publicity*” (25.07% of variance) and reflected a focus towards the creation of a positive image and downplaying negative publicity. This factor also emphasized relationships with media as well as other groups such as the community, government, employees etc. The second factor was named “*social responsibility*” (21.64% of variance) and reflected the efforts of public relations to implement social responsibility initiatives, to take a public stance, and create public awareness on social issues. The third factor was named “*marketing support*” (18.12% of variance) and was associated with public relations activities that mainly support marketing and product or services promotion campaigns. All three factors showed high internal reliability as the Cronbach’s alpha values of all factors were well above the 0.70 threshold (Table 4). Then, the three factors were converted to three

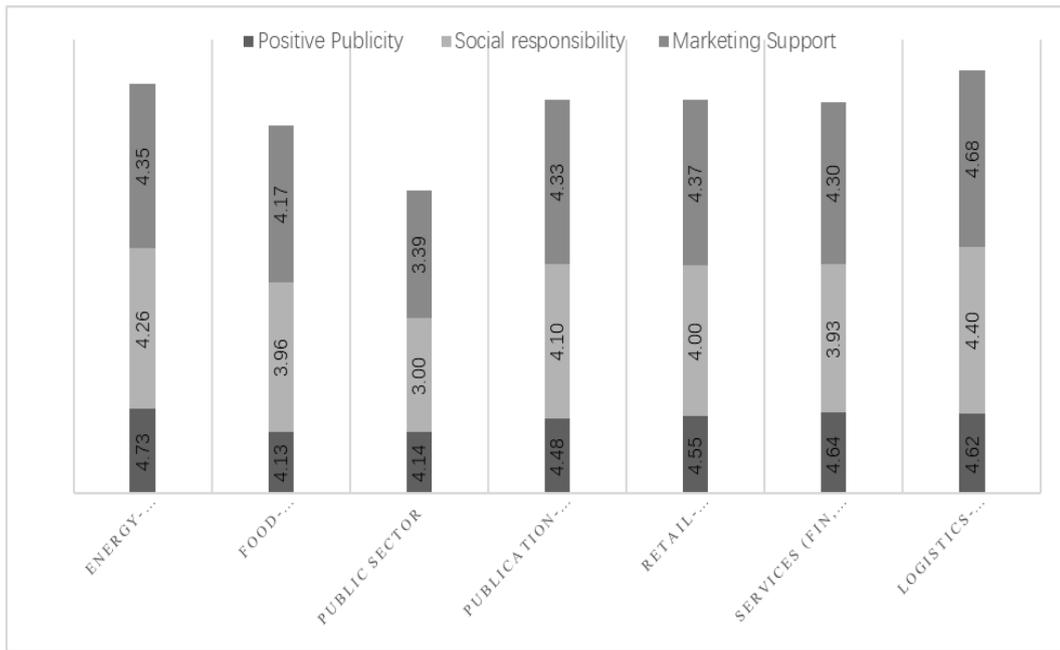
composite variables based on the average item scores of the variables that comprised each factor. To compose the measurement tool of the strategic role of public relations these three composite factors produced the total score of the strategic activities index.

Table 4. Results of Factor Analysis of Public Relations Practice

	Positive publicity Mean (SD) (a=0.883)	Social responsibility (a=0.847)	Marketing support (a=0.78)
Building and preserving positive image for the organization	4.69(0.68)		
Building and preserving corporate reputation	4.68 (0.64)		
Communicating during crisis	4.57 (0.72)		
Building relationships with media representatives	4.55 (0.72)		
Building relationships with stakeholders such as community, government, employees, NGOs.	4.36 (0.76)		
Eliminating negative publicity	4.15 (0.86)		
Promoting organizational values		4.35 (0.88)	
Implementing and communicating social responsibility activities		4.32 (0.88)	
Communicating initiatives with NGOs and philanthropic organizations		3.85 (1.07)	
Positioning the stance of the organization on public matters		3.79 (0.89)	
Creating public awareness on social issues (e.g., racism, sexual harassment, etc.)		3.57 (1.15)	
Promoting the organization's positive image			4.48 (0.66)
Identifying communication opportunities			4.27 (0.84)
Promoting products, services and supporting the launch of new products/services			4.16 (1.00)
Supporting marketing and promotional campaigns			4.15 (0.82)
Mean scores of composite factors	4.49 (0.58)	3.97 (0.77)	4.26 (0.65)

A one-way anova was performed to test whether organizations from different industry sectors showed similarities or differences in their mean scores for each factor. The results of the analyses of variance showed that the industry sectors do not differ significantly ($p>0.05$) in their mean scores of the positive publicity factor ($F=1.537$, $sig=0.180$). However, significant ($p<0.05$) differences were observed in the mean scores of the social responsibility factor across the various industry sectors ($F=2.853$, $sig=0.015$). In addition, the industry sectors differed significantly ($p<0.05$) in their mean scores on the marketing support factor ($F=3.23$, $sig=0.08$). In general, the energy-technology-industrial manufacturing sector and the services sector exhibited the highest scores in the positive publicity factor, while the logistic-transportation and the retail and consumer goods sectors scored highly on the marketing support factor. Regarding the social responsibility factor, the sectors of logistic-transportation and energy-technology-industrial manufacturing showed the highest scores. On the other hand, organizations from the public sector had the lowest scores on all the three factors, while the food-beverage-hospitality sector exhibited the lowest scores on the positive publicity factor.

Figure 1. Public Relations Practice across Industry Sectors

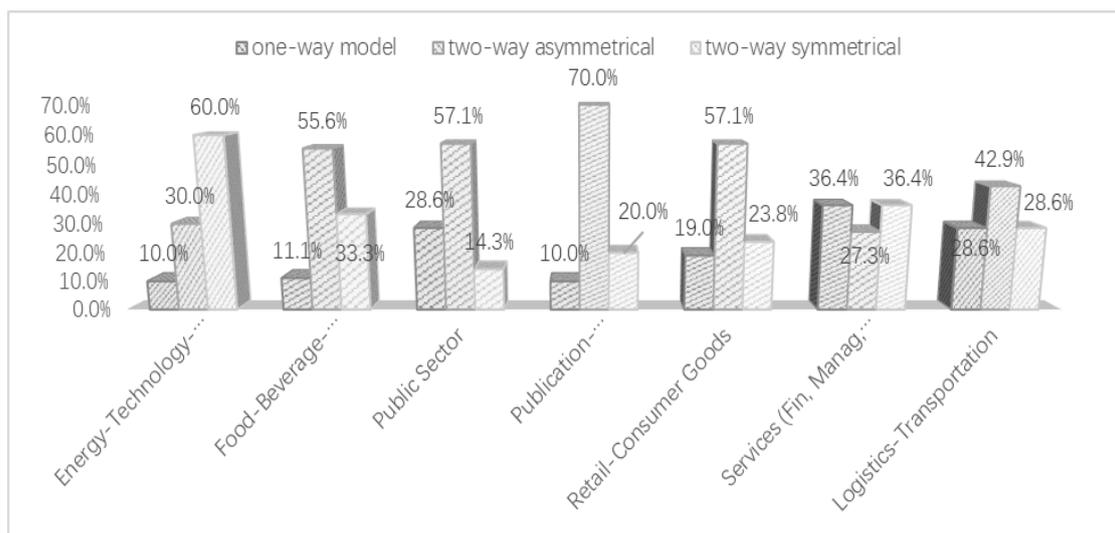


4.3. Model of Public Relations

To understand the model of public relations that is practised by public relations practitioners of the sample, respondents were asked to indicate which of the three models - one-way information model, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical - is practised more often. The results suggest that most organizations favour the two-way asymmetrical model (49.3%) followed by the two-way symmetrical one (30.7%). The one-way model was the least preferred model by public relations professionals (20%).

Figure 2 shows the models utilized by each sector. Most of the industry sectors mainly utilize the two-way asymmetrical model with the exception of the energy-technology-industrial manufacturing sector, which makes use of the two-way symmetrical model. However, results of the chi-square test indicate that no significant differences exist between organizations of different sectors with respect to the public relations model that is used by practitioners ($\chi^2=10.79$, sig=0.547).

Figure 2. Public Relations Model by Industry Sector (Percentages Are Per Industry)



4.4. Empowerment and relationship with senior management

Results indicate that 13.3% of the respondents report to the marketing manager, implying that public relations is not empowered by top management. In addition, 14.7% of practitioners report that they act only as consultants and offer their communication advice to the CEO or members of the top

management in meetings. On the other hand, 45.3% of practitioners indicated that they have a direct reporting relationship with the CEO, an indication of empowerment in the dominant coalition. Interestingly, 26.7% act as strategic public relations managers as they report directly to the CEO and act as communication consultants in the top management. Chi-squares tests indicated that there are no significant differences in the role of public relations head enacted across the industry sectors. However, it can be argued that non-strategic roles (e.g., reporting to the marketing manager) were found in organizations from the retail and consumer goods and entertainment-publication-sports sectors. Public relations managers of the public sector serve mainly as communication consultants. On the other hand, more strategic roles (direct reporting to the CEO and communication consultant) were found in the energy-technology-industrial manufacturing and logistic-transportation sectors.

We identified three main types of public relations influence and involvement in the strategic management of organizations: (a) advising, (b) operational - implementing communication programs to support organizational strategy, and (c) strategic-participating in strategic decision making at the organizational level by proposing strategies and being part of the dominant coalition. Findings indicate that public relations heads reported that they are involved in the strategic decision-making process of the organization and thus have a strategic role (58.7%). An important number of respondents are regarded as operational supporters and communicators of the organizational strategy as they mainly execute communication programs to achieve the organizational goals (32%). To a lesser extent, public relations practitioners act as advisors regarding the main communication problems and the public's reactions to the organizational strategies (9.3%). Based on a chi-square test, no significant differences ($p < 0.05$) were found between the industry sectors in regard to the involvement of public relations in the strategic management process ($\chi^2 = 18.62$, $sig = 0.098$). However, it can be argued that practitioners in the entertainment-publications-sports sector mainly function as advisors, while the retail and consumer goods sector and the food and beverage sectors mainly implement communication programs. Participating in the strategic decision-making process was mainly observed in organizations from the retail and consumer goods and the energy-technology-industrial manufacturing sectors.

4.5. Strategic Research and Evaluation

Research and evaluation activities received moderate scores, suggesting that practitioners are not utilizing research methods to a high extent to derive their objectives and evaluate their strategies (Table 5). More specifically, respondents indicated that they conduct mainly internet research ($M = 3.47$) followed by analysis of the media coverage ($M = 3.36$), and research on secondary sources for the identification of social trends ($M = 3.13$). In regard to the evaluation methods, again, web and social media analysis was the most preferred method ($M = 3.71$) followed by output evaluation in terms of public relations activities executed ($M = 3.08$). Outcome evaluation and other more sophisticated research techniques were utilized to a lesser extent.

Analyses of variance indicated that organizations across sectors differ only with respect to the usage of research methods such as interviews with representatives ($F = 2.617$, $sig = 0.024$), focus groups ($F = 2.298$, $sig = 0.044$), and the evaluation technique of web and social media analysis ($F = 2.353$, $sig = 0.040$). Specifically, the logistic-transportation sectors utilized the research technique of interviews to a higher extent, while the energy-technology-industrial manufacturing sector scored higher on the usage of focus groups. The entertainment-publications-sports is utilizing more the evaluation method of web and social media analysis.

Table 5. Research and Evaluation Activities

Pre-Campaign research practices	Mean Scores (SD)	Post-campaign evaluation practices	Mean Scores (SD)
Internet research	3.47 (1.08)	Web and social media analytics	3.71 (1.12)
Content analysis of media coverage	3.36 (1.14)	Output evaluation (e.g., activities performed)	3.08 (1.19)
Identification of trends through secondary sources and studies	3.13 (1.08)	Outcome evaluation in terms of changes in perceptions, attitudes, behaviours of the public	2.95 (1.18)
Interviews with key representatives from their public	2.45 (0.99)	Qualitative or quantitative research	2.88 (1.13)
Surveys through questionnaires	2.43 (1.13)		
Focus groups	2.37 (1.06)		

It should be noted that for the development of the measurement tool for the strategic role of public relations, two composite scales (with averaged items) were developed, one for the research index (Cronbach's alpha: 0.746) and one for the evaluation index (Cronbach's alpha: 0.813).

4.6. Communication Strategy

Further, the study addressed the way the communication strategy is formulated by practitioners in order to shed more light on the strategic role of public relations and the prevalence of prescriptive versus emergent strategies. The findings suggest that only 9.3% of respondents are shaping their communication strategies without a strategic focus and based on subjective knowledge and ideas from executives. On the other hand, 41.3% of practitioners design their strategy based on organizational goals and objectives indicating an operational focus that aims at prescriptive strategy communication. 20% of respondents formulate their communication strategy by considering organizational goals along with results from research activities. Almost one third (29.3%) of respondents are designing emerging strategies through active listening and exchange of ideas with relevant publics. Chi-square tests indicate that there are no differences across sectors in the way that practitioners design their communication strategies ($\chi^2=12.48$, sig=0.821). However, it can be noted that although practitioners of most sectors are designing their strategy based on corporate goals, the sector of entertainment-publication-sports mainly utilizes input from ideas of public relations executives while active listening is employed by practitioners of sectors such as logistics-transportation and services.

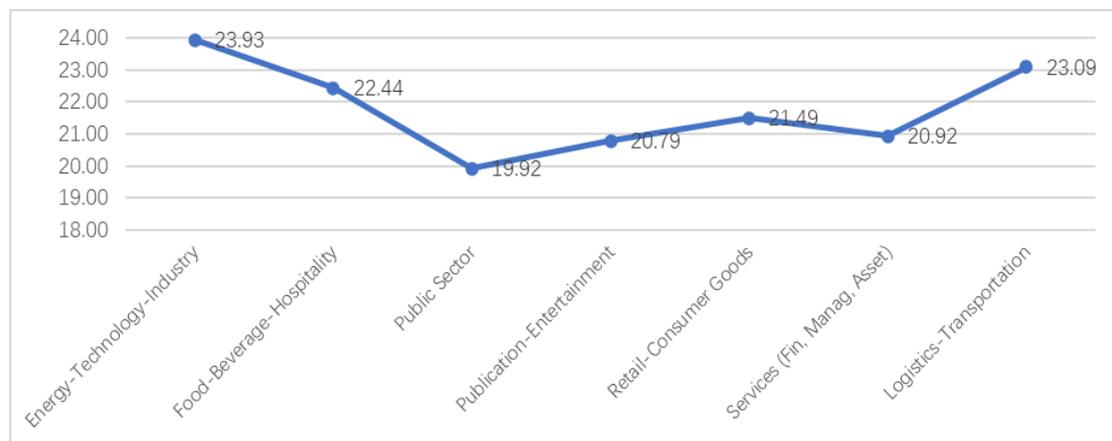
4.7. Overall Measurement Tool for the Strategic Role of Public Relations

To develop the overall index for the strategic role of public relations, the eight constructs [i.e., autonomy, strategic activities (mean scores), public relations model, empowerment in strategic management, reporting relationship with CEO, research (mean score), evaluation (mean score), and communication strategy] were summed. The scores of the overall index for each organization had a range between 7 and 31.

The average score of the overall index for the organizations of the sample was 21.74 (SD=3.36). The top two organizations with the highest score in the strategic role of public relations originated from the sectors of energy-technology-industrial manufacturing (M=29.42) and logistic-transportation (27.97). These two public relations functions are medium-sized autonomous departments and originate from large companies which mainly perform strategic activities related to publicity and social responsibility and to a lesser extent support marketing activities. They also employ the two-way symmetrical model, are empowered in strategic management processes, have a direct reporting relationship with the CEO and are invited to top management meetings, and implement emergent strategies. Interestingly, these departments did not exhibit higher scores in terms of research and evaluation compared to the other departments of the sample.

Concerning the different sectors, the results of analysis of variance suggest that the different industries do differ significantly ($p<0.05$) in their overall strategic scores ($F=1.640$, sig=0.150). However, as Figure 3 shows, the energy-technology-industrial manufacturing sector (M=23.93, SD=2.57) and the logistics and transportation sector (M=23.09, SD=3.58) performed better in terms of their strategic orientation in public relations.

Figure 3. Overall Index of The Strategic Role of Public Relations Across Industries



5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study has tried to shed light on the nature and extent of strategic public relations practice in Greece as well as develop a holistic overall measurement tool for the assessment of the strategic role of the public relations function. The impact of the industry on the strategic focus of public relations was also examined.

Findings suggest that almost half of the public relations departments are autonomous functions. On the positive side, the assessment of the overall strategic focus of the public relations functions of the sample revealed that practitioners exhibited a considerable amount of strategic orientation driven by satisfactory levels of empowerment in the strategic management of organizations and involvement in decision-making. Although public relations practitioners seem to have “a seat at the table” their input in the organizational strategy formulation is far from strategic given that it is not driven by formal and informal research and outcome evaluation methods since they place emphasis on tactical web analysis and social media metrics to assess their performance without really engaging in active listening and assessment of the true outcome of public relations.

Concerning the strategic activities of the Greek public relations function, results suggest that they focus on inbound (positive publicity) and outbound activities (marketing support) (Verhoeven et al., 2011). Social responsibility activities which capture the most strategic and reflective role of public relations were embraced to a minor degree. The public relations practitioners of the sample utilize mainly two-way asymmetrical communication models and employ prescriptive communication strategies to support organizational goals. However, a closer look at the results suggests that practitioners' strategic way of supporting organizational goals takes two forms: (a) strategic advising and counselling of top managers as practitioners have access to the decision-making process but exhibit a low level process without though engaging in boundary spanning or being reflective of their observations, and (b) operationally supporting organizational strategy (Verčič and Zeffass, 2016) by employing two-way asymmetrical communication and prescriptive strategies. The above findings could be attributed to several reasons. Practitioners might be lacking the knowledge or might have limited resources to design and conduct research and thus evaluate the outcome of their strategies. Failing to do so holds them back from becoming strategic facilitators and enhancing the status of their communication unit. This finding confirms the arguments of Macnamara and Zeffass (2017) that the “lack of rigorous measurement and evaluation of PR is paradoxical given that the field of practice is growing rapidly and allegedly becoming increasingly professionalized” (p. 322).

The present study enriches our limited knowledge about the practice of public relations in Greece by also contributing to the literature about strategic communication and strategic management of public relations. The present study has several theoretical implications. First, the strategic focus of public relations/communication was assessed using alternative measures compared to existing studies such as the Excellence Study (Grunig et al., 2002) that do not effectively capture the practice of public relations in non-American contexts. The proposed framework developed an overall measurement tool for the strategic focus of public relations by assessing: the strategic activities of public relations; the autonomy of the function, the model of public relations; the empowerment in strategic decision making, the reporting relationship with the CEO, the research and evaluation activities; and the communication strategy.

Second, the present study adds to the scant literature regarding the extent to which public relations are managed in a strategic way and contribute in a strategic manner to organizations in the Greek context. While the data collected do not allow us to generalize regarding the public relations practice in Greece, some initial findings were observed. Greek practitioners are not isolated experts on communication in organizations but enact strategic roles such as advisors of the top management for strategy formulation issues and operational supporters of the enterprise strategy by implementing mainly prescriptive communication strategies.

Third, the study sheds light on differences that might exist across the different sectors in a given country in regard to the strategic focus of public relations. Until now, most studies have focused on analyzing public relations in one industry/sector (e.g., Moss et al., 1996; Valentini, 2021; Anani-Bossman and Mudzanani, 2020). Findings indicate that there are no major significant differences across sectors, and that there might be a homogeneity in the practice of public relations across organizations of various industries. However, it was found that several sectors showed a more strategic focus compared to others. For example, of all the industry sectors the energy-technology-industrial manufacturing sector along with the logistics-transportation one exhibited the highest scores in most strategic aspects. This finding corroborates the arguments of Moss et al. (2000), who suggested that public relations departments working for organizations in highly competitive industries or in politically influenced environments show a strong strategic focus to achieve competitive advantage and have an

impact on the political decisions. On the other hand, managers from the public sector are practising public relations mainly in a non-strategic manner.

Several practical implications could be derived from the present study. The overall measurement model of the strategic role of public relations can be used a tool for public relations managers to assess their strategic orientation and demonstrate their value to top managers. It is herein proposed that public relations practitioners need to provide strategic input to the organizational decision-making process by gathering intelligence, conducting environmental scanning, formal and informal research, emphasizing organizational listening and evaluating their efforts on an outcome basis. Only if practitioners offer advice and input that is research-driven can they create value for the organization. In addition, practitioners need to implement two-way symmetrical models of communication to a greater degree and intensify the employment of emergent communication strategies that consider the needs and desires of stakeholders and adapt the communication policy to them. Public relations practitioners in Greece need to increase the reflective and societal focus of their practice by implementing social responsibility campaigns and working closely with various societal groups. A strategic turn in the public relations of the public sector in Greece is imperative even though bureaucratic obstacles stand in the way.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

The main limitations of the present study stem from the low response rate and the lack of generalizability of the results to all organizations in Greece. According to Baruch and Brooks (2018), the low response rate could be attributed to factors that researchers cannot control or the inability of the survey to reach the target audiences since the majority of the emails were sent to generic email addresses of organizations. As Anani-Bossman and Mudzanani (2020) argue, the purpose of the study was not to generalize results but to “explore meaning and gain insight into an issue rarely studied” in Greece (p. 546) and to create a diversified sample that includes organizations of various sectors.

Future research could replicate the method of the present study to assess the practice of public relations in other countries of Southern Europe with similar cultural characteristics to Greece. The study could be expanded to include the views of executives that work in public relations agencies regarding the strategic orientation of their practices. The impact of variables such as environmental uncertainty, role ambiguity and role conflict on the strategic focus of public relations could also yield additional fruitful insights.

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