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Testing the Linkages Among the Organization–Public Relationship and Attitude and Behavioral Intentions

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This research tested a model that posits the linkages among perceptions of the organization–public relationships, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward an organization among members of a key public. Among the 6 relationship indexes proposed by Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999), perceptions of satisfaction and control mutuality were the best predictors of a positive attitude toward the organization. In this study we also found that positive attitude was a precursor to supportive behavioral intentions toward the organization.

More than two decades ago, Ferguson (1984) suggested that the relationship between a public and an organization should be the unit of study for public relations scholarship. She argued that this emphasis was more appropriate than the communication processes and communication effects that had dominated mass communication and public relations theory building.

Although little subsequent research was conducted initially after Ferguson's (1984) call, an emphasis on organization–public relationship (OPR) as the focal variable for public relations theory and practice more recently has emerged as a main paradigm for the field. Several books (e.g., Ledingham & Bruning's, 2000,

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Public Relations As Relationship Management), more than 40 academic journal articles, and several decades of national conference papers have dealt with OPR (Ki & Shin, 2006). According to Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, and Jones (2003), who examined the status of theory building in public relations, relationship theory is the second most commonly used perspective in public relations scholarship; and Ledingham (2003) argued that relationship management meets the acceptable criteria for a general theory of public relations.

Given the importance of relationship theory, developing new ways for evaluating public relations' effectiveness has become a paramount task facing scholars and practitioners. If the ultimate goal of public relations is to build mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics, then measuring the outcomes of those relationships provides an important indicator of public relations effectiveness (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; Lindenmann, 1999). From the relationship management perspective, the goal of public relations is to build, nurture, and maintain OPRs rather than manipulate public opinion (Ehling, 1992). Therefore, the focus of public relations program evaluation changes from measuring the dissemination of organizational messages and their impact on publics to determining the influence that organizational communication and other behaviors have on key publics' perceptions of their relationship with the organization and how these perceptions affect key publics' attitudes and behaviors (Bruning & Ledingham, 2000).

Several studies have paid attention to measuring OPR (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2004; Kim, 2001) or developing its scales or dimensions (Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Huang, 2001). Although a public relationship has been defined or treated as a perception or as measuring perceptions of participants (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999), less attention has been devoted to the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of the OPR.

In this study we attempted to shed more light on the link that is implicit in the relationship management literature between positive relationship outcomes and attitudes and behaviors that are presumed to follow. For example, the Excellence Study (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) concluded that positive, long-term relationships represent the value of public relations to organizations because these relationships are assumed to encourage supportive behaviors (e.g., sales, donations, favorable legislation, high performance among employees) while preventing unsupportive behaviors (e.g., litigation, boycotts, government regulation) among publics, which in turn allows organizations to be their most effective. However, despite the appeal of this logic, the body of empirical research that documents the extent to which relationship outcomes are truly predictive of publics' attitudes and behavior toward organizations is still embryonic.

One reason for the dearth of scholarship that explores these presumed connections may be inconsistency among public relations scholars when using the term *relationship* as perceptions or cognitions (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999) versus attitude as an affective orientation (Bruning, 2002). And, although some researchers have dealt with relationship perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions–behavior separately, a comprehensive model that outlines and simultaneously tests the linkages among these variables has yet to be fully developed.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how the effectively managed OPR can affect a public's attitudes and behavioral intentions. Following Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999), we argue that perceptions (as cognitions) and attitudes are best measured separately. This research thus tested a model of relationship perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions using structural equation modeling (SEM)—a statistical technique for multivariate data analysis combining aspects of multiple regression and factor analysis—to simultaneously estimate a series of interrelated relationships. Put simply, SEM allows researchers to empirically determine how well patterns in their collected data match the relationships posed in the theoretical model being tested. One of the greatest advantages of the technique is that SEM is able to accommodate measurement error directly into the estimation of a series of dependent relationships (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

OPRs As Perceptions

The approach taken here for evaluating OPRs as perceptions is not new. In 1990, Broom and Dozier suggested a coorientation process for measuring OPRs in which an organization's and key public's perceptions were tested to determine levels of agreement and accuracy. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) measured OPR based on trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. They found that these variables influenced the public's loyalty as well as behavioral intentions toward the organization as long as the public was aware of the organization's relationship-building activities (in this case, community relations initiatives). Bruning and Ledingham (2000) also measured the OPR based on the public's perceptions of personal, professional, and community relationships. These researchers found that the public's perceptions of its personal and professional relationship with the organization significantly affected the public's evaluation of overall satisfaction with the organization.

Extending the scales developed by Bruning and Ledingham (1999), Bruning and Galloway (2003) measured customers' relationship with their electrical service provider. Factor analysis isolated five underlying dimensions of this OPR. *Anthropomorphism* refers to the way the organization demonstrates positive human qualities (e.g., trustworthy, open, willing to invest in the relationship). *Professional benefits and expectations* represents a public's perceptions of the professionalism of the organization and expectations for how the organization will behave in the relationship, such as being responsible and providing benefits. *Personal commitment* is characteristic of wanting to maintain the relationship, feeling linked to the organization, and wanting the relationship to continue for a long time. *Community improvement* focuses on customers' perceptions that the company supports events that are of interest to customers and plays an active role in making the community better. Last, *comparison of alternatives* represents the public's assessment of the attractiveness of alternative organizations. Using these newly developed scales, Bruning, Langenhop, and Green (2004) measured the city–resident relationship and discovered that the quality of the relationship significantly influenced residents' evaluation of their housing experiences.

Drawing from Huang (1997), Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999) suggested the six dimensions of *control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, communal relationship,* and *exchange relationship* to measure OPR. Several studies have since measured and validated Hon and J. E. Grunig's indicators (Hon & Brunner, 2002; Huang, 2001; Hung, 2004; Jo et al., 2004; Kim, 2001).

Our study builds on J. E. Grunig and Huang's (2000) model and therefore adopted Hon and J. E. Grunig's (1999) relationship measurement scales. We believe that this model makes a clearer and more accurate distinction between measuring relationship maintenance strategies and measuring relationship outcomes or indicators of a positive relationship. For example, measures such as openness, investment, and community improvement are better understood as relationship maintenance strategies. Previous research in public relations (e.g., J. E. Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2006) and in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 1994; Chelune, 1979) posits that these maintenance strategies are relationship processes rather than outcomes. At the same time, the trust element of Bruning and Galloway's (2003) concept of anthropomorphism can be captured by measuring trust directly, and the comparison of alternatives factor measures aspects of commitment.

Some public relations scholars have attempted to explore how effectively managed OPRs can be connected to positive outcomes such as (a) relationship building with key publics (Broom, Casey, & Ritchey, 2000; Hutton, 1999; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Kovacs, 2001; Ledingham, 2003; Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001), (b) enhanced reputation (Bridges & Nelson, 2000; J. E. Grunig, 2001; Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001), (c) behavioral intent (Bruning, 2000; Bruning & Ledingham, 2000; Bruning & Ralston, 2000; Ledingham, 2001; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, 2000), and (d) even actual behavior (Bruning, 2002; Bruning & Lambe, 2002).

Other researchers (Bruning & Hatfield, 2002; Bruning et al., 2004; Bruning & Ledingham, 1998, 2000) have treated satisfaction as the attitudinal outcome of a quality OPR. However, we suggest here that a public's perception of a satisfying relationship with an organization is an antecedent to attitudes about the organization and, ultimately, behavioral intentions.

To measure the public's perceptions of its relationship with an organization, Hon and J. E. Grunig's (1999) six indexes were used. The following discussion provides a brief definition of each.

Trust. Trust is defined as "one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party" (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 3). Trust has three subdimensions—integrity, dependability, and competence (Barney & Hansen, 1994; Carnevale, 1995; Daley & Vasu, 1995). Integrity is the belief that the other party is fair and just. Dependability refers to consistency between verbal statements and behavior. Competence is the degree to which parties believe the other has the ability to do what it says it will do (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999).

Control mutuality. Control mutuality refers to "the degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another" (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 3). This dimension relates to the influence of one party on the relative probabilities of actions by the other (Jo et al., 2004). In most cases, one party has power in some contexts and shares or gives it up in others. Therefore, "control" does not necessarily have to be equally distributed for a stable relationship as long as inequalities are accepted by the other party. In other words, the power distribution of the relationship tends to be negotiable and dynamic.

Commitment. Commitment is defined as "the extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote" (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 3). It consists of two underlying dimensions: continuance and affective commitment. Continuance commitment has to do with a certain line of action (i.e., behavior), whereas affective commitment is an emotional orientation (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Satisfaction. Satisfaction represents whether one party feels favorably toward the other (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). Satisfaction occurs when one party perceives that the other behaves to maintain a positive relationship (Hosmer, 1996; Miles, Patrick, & King, 1996). From a social exchange perspective, it often increases with rewards received and decreases with costs incurred by the relationship (Jo et al., 2004; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). A satisfying relationship produces more benefits than costs.

Communal relationship. Communal relationship relates to the extent to which parties in a relationship give benefits to each other because they are concerned for the other's welfare (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999). In this type of public relationship, an organization spends extra resources (i.e., time and effort) to improve publics' welfare. Hon and J. E. Grunig stressed that communal relationships are what separates the public relations function from the cost–benefit marketing orientation of exchange relationships. Therefore, communal relationships are key to understanding the role and potential value of public relations. In other words, developing communal relationships with strategic constituencies is significant if organizations are to be socially responsible and contribute value to society (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999).

Exchange relationship. An exchange relationship exists when one party gives benefits to the other because the other gave benefits in the past or expects to do so in the future (Hon & J. E. Grunig, 1999, p. 3). Thibaut and Kelley (1959) found that, in this type of relationship, social interdependence had more impact on relationship quality than mere exchange. Social interdependence means that, to assess relationship quality, people make comparisons with other standards such as the quality of the relationship they had in the past or their relationships with others (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Attitude

Researchers have established a definition of attitude in several but similar ways. According to Rosenberg and Hovland (1963), attitudes typically are defined as "predispositions to respond in a particular way toward a specified class of objects" (p. 1). Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) defined someone's attitude as "a function of his/her salient beliefs at a given point in time" (p. 222). Mitchell and Olson (1981) argued that attitude is "an individual's internal evaluation of an object" (p. 318).

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) also said that an attitude is "a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object" (p. 6). This description explains the three basic features of attitude: (a) the notion that attitude is learned, (b) attitude predisposes action (behavior), and (c) such actions are consistently favorable or unfavorable toward the object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Attitude is usually viewed as a latent or underlying variable that is assumed to guide or affect behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).

In public relations, evaluating publics' attitudes becomes more important when seeking to measure the overall impact or effectiveness of public relations. As Lindenmann (2002) indicated, attitude research measures not only what the public says about something, but also what they feel and how they are inclined to act (their motivational or drive tendencies). Given the importance of attitude research in measuring public relations outcomes, the perceptions of OPRs are used here to predict the public's attitude toward the organization. This research assumes that perceptions precede shifts in attitude because the relationship literature suggests that relationship perceptions are antecedents of supportive (and absence of unsupportive) feelings and behaviors among publics toward organizations.

Behavioral Intentions

Behavioral intentions can be explained as “the intention to perform a particular behavior, a plan to put behavior into effect” (Perloff, 2003, p. 92). Social scientists frequently measure behavioral intentions as a predictor of actual behavior because inquiring about the behavioral intentions of people is the most reliable predictor of behavior; behavioral intentions also tend to be identical to behavior because most social behavior is under the individual’s control (Perloff, 2003). More important, behavioral intentions are an intermediate variable between attitude and behavior, according to the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991).

Hierarchy of Effects

In this study, a hierarchy of effects model is posed to explain the linkages among relationship perceptions, attitudes toward the organization, and behavioral intentions. The theory of a hierarchy of effects can provide a meaningful description of these connections as a series of stages members of a public might go through (for an overview, see Jeffres & Perloff, 1997). Historically, this theoretical perspective has been rooted in social learning and diffusion of innovations theory (Valente, Paredes, & Poppe, 1998) and was used as one of the most popular bodies of work in advertising and marketing communication (Barry, 1987). Researchers in several mass communication areas such as advertising, public relations, health communication, and political communication have adopted this perspective (Chaffee & Roser, 1986).

Despite the extensive debate on the sequence of influence, this theoretical approach postulates that communication occurs through a series of steps including cognition, affect, and behavior (Berelson, 1996; Lavidge & Steiner, 1961; McGuire, 1986; Severin & Tankard, 2001). Cognitive reaction is thought to precede effect on attitude, which precedes a behavioral reaction (Ray, 1973). Attitude is a reasoned product of perception, and it is a reliable predictor of behavior (Chaffee & Roser, 1986).

Although scholars in public relations have not extensively studied any hierarchy of effects among relationship cognitions, attitudes, and behaviors, some have attempted to link relationship perceptions and attitudes, or relationship attitudes and behaviors. For example, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) examined the link between their five relationship dimensions and attitudes toward an organization. These researchers found that “organizational involvement in and support of the community in which it operates can engender loyalty toward an organization among key publics when that involvement/support is known by key publics” (p. 63). Bruning and Ledingham (2000) investigated consumers’ perceptions of three types of relationships (personal, professional, and community relationships) with a bank and found that consumers' perception of personal and professional relationships had a significant impact on evaluations of overall satisfaction with the organization. Bruning (2002), who studied the university–student relationship as it relates to student retention, found that relationship attitudes were different for students who returned from those who left and suggested that links between relationship attitudes and outcome behaviors existed. However, neither of these studies suggested a comprehensive model explaining perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors nor the linkages among them. Therefore, the following hypotheses and model were drawn based on the literature (see Figure 1).

Hypotheses

- H1: A public's perceptions of its relationship with the organization will influence the public's attitude toward the organization.
- H2: A public's perceptions of its relationship with the organization will influence the public's behavioral intentions toward the organization.
- H3: A public's attitude toward the organization will influence the public's behavioral intentions.

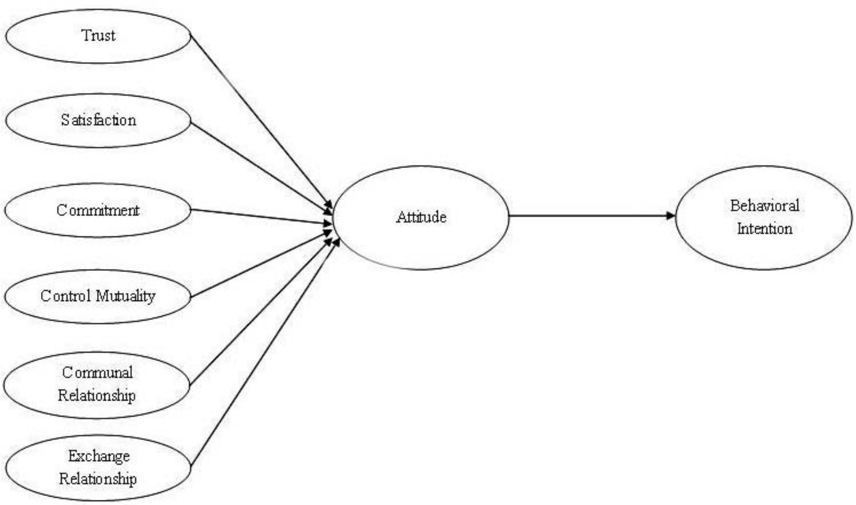

FIGURE 1 Proposed model.

METHOD

Data Collection

This study measured perceptions of the relationship students have with the large, public university investigated here. Although scholars tend to eschew using students for research samples, in this case students were an appropriate choice (perhaps the most appropriate). Students could provide meaningful answers to questions about their relationship with the university, and students are a key public and target for the university's relationship-building efforts.

This study's sampling approach also is an improvement over some of the techniques used in initial pilot studies of public relationships for which researchers used convenience sampling among the general public. In these cases, the assumption that respondents had relationship perceptions about the organization, even well-known organizations, may have been faulty. In other words, it seems likely that much research has measured organizations' reputational relationship among the general public (Hung, 2006). However, assessing outcomes of an experiential relationship between an organization and its strategic constituencies is a more meaningful pursuit (Hung, 2006). And, it seems likely that the approach taken here does so. Students have daily or near-daily direct interactions with their university, and the relationship by its nature is life long. Even if students exit the relationship before graduating or ignore the relationship post graduation, they can never undo the experience of having attended a particular university.

Using a nonprobability sampling technique was the only option available to the researchers because a comprehensive list of students' addresses or emails was not available because of student privacy legalities. The campus phone book is an incomplete listing; and during spring semester, the time the survey was conducted, the phonebook would include many students who had graduated the previous December.

The first author and four graduate students recruited participants at a central location on the university campus. Data collection took place on three different days between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Respondents took 10 to 20 min to complete the survey and received a slice of pizza as compensation. A total of 277 students agreed to complete the survey. The researchers examined the completed questionnaires and eliminated 10 of them—nonstudent respondents, incomplete questionnaires, and those that displayed a response set (i.e., answers that were the same for all of the questions). The final sample contained 267 valid cases.

Survey Instrument

Relationship perceptions. The researchers followed Hon and J. E. Grunig's (1999) guidelines for which OPR items to select if using a shortened questionnaire. Several of the suggested items for the shortened version were replaced with other choices provided by Hon and J. E. Grunig. These substitutions were guided by Brunner's (2000) use of the Hon and J. E. Grunig instrument for which the context was also the university–student relationship.

For each of the six relationship indexes, a Likert-type scale was used, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Respondents also were allowed to choose "N/A."

Attitude toward the organization. Attitude toward the organization was defined as the public's overall evaluation of the university. To measure this attitude, students were asked to rate the university using a well-known semantic differential scale (i.e., dislike–like and negative–positive).

Behavioral intentions. Scholars often have used behavioral intentions instead of measuring actual behavior because intentions are the most reliable predictor of behavior. Moreover, behavioral intention, behavior, and action are grouped under the same "conative" heading (Ray, 1973). Therefore, it was reasonable to use behavioral intentions instead of behavior for this study.

The scale measuring students' behavioral intentions toward the university was adopted from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1996), although it was modified for the research purposes here. This study adopted four items to measure behavioral intention using the same 7-point scale as the OPR items. N/A also was included as a choice.

Cronbach's alphas for the initial indexes were as follows: trust = .81, control mutuality = .68, commitment = .72, satisfaction = .85, communal relationship = .62, exchange relationship = .57, attitude = .83, and behavioral intention = .79.

An exploratory factor analysis for all measurement items was conducted. Poorly performing items were deleted if they had factor loadings of less than .65 or highly loaded on an unintended factor (Hair et al., 1998). Reliability tests were then performed for each of the indexes. Cronbach's alphas for the relationship perceptions were as follows: trust = .88, control mutuality = .87, commitment = .86, satisfaction = .89, communal relationship = .72, and exchange relationship = .79. The alpha for attitude was .92 and .81 for behavioral intentions.

Demographic Profiles

The questionnaire ended with several demographic items. Included were gender, age, year in school, length of the time enrolled at the university, and ethnic and racial identification. Among the 267 participants, gender was almost evenly split (approximately 51% were women and 49% were men). Forty-nine percent were White, 24% African American, 11% Hispanic/Latino, 7% Asian, and about 9%

indicated “other” (e.g., international or multiracial). These statistics suggested that the gender and racial demographics of the sample were reasonably reflective of the overall student population of the university.

The mean age of the participants was 20. Year in school was as follows: graduate students (5%), seniors (22%), juniors (34%), sophomores (20%), and freshmen (19%). The majority were enrolled as full-time students (95%), whereas 4% attended part time (3 did not answer this question). The high percentage of full-time and upper division students makes it likely that the majority of sampled students could provide meaningful responses to the questionnaire items. In other words, it seems reasonable to assume that these students had developed perceptions about their relationship with the university that might be predictive of attitude and behavioral intentions.

Analysis

SEM is “a melding of factor analysis and path analysis into one comprehensive statistical methodology” (Kaplan, 2000, p. 3). Communication scholars have enlisted the statistical technique for more than a quarter century (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002). This technique can accommodate measurement error directly into the estimation of dependent relationships (Hair et al., 1998). In addition, a measurement model (a submodel in SEM) can test whether the observed variables (indicators) can measure the underlying latent constructs reliably and validly. Therefore, the statistical technique can test whether the measurement model fits the data and test the number of factors that can be detected and reliably estimated in the data.

The proposed model shown in Figure 1 was analyzed using the LISREL SEM program (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996). LISREL offers global tests of the adequacy of the entire model, simultaneous estimation of all structural coefficients, and tests of statistical significance for all coefficients (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1988). The chi-square goodness-of-fit statistic is reported as an index of model adequacy for which a nonsignificant value indicates a good fit of the model to the data (i.e., the patterns in the data do not significantly differ from the proposed theoretical model). Several common fit indexes indicate how well the specified model explains the data including root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), comparative fit index (CFI), and nonnormed fit index (NNFI). RMSEA values less than .60 typically indicate good fit. For SRMR, values less than .09 indicate good fit. For CFI and NNFI, values range from 0.00 to 1.00, with higher values indicating better fit; generally, .95 and above is considered a good fit of the data to the model.

RESULTS

The correlation matrix and descriptive statistics for all of the variables are displayed in Table 1. Correlations were calculated using listwise deletion when there were missing values. The number of cases after listwise deletion was 246.

The descriptive statistics are somewhat unexpected because they show that the mean scores for items measuring attitude toward the organization are higher than the mean scores for most of the relationship items. The means for the attitudinal measures range from 5.32 to 5.36, whereas the means for the relationship measures fall between 3.56 and 5.12. In addition, the mean scores for the behavioral intention items (5.64 to 5.86) are even higher than the mean scores for attitude toward the organization. Although, overall, the students evaluated their relationship with the university positively, and these relationship perceptions are consistent with expressed attitude and behavioral intentions.

SEM

As the first step, the SEM was respecified using confirmatory factor analysis to determine if the study's measurement model adequately fits the data. Overall goodness-of-fit indexes were calculated using RMSEA, SRMR, and CFI. As shown in Table 2, these indexes were determined to be satisfactory (RMSEA = .049, SRMR = .053, and CFI = .97). These results indicate that the measurement model was a reasonable explanation of the covariances in the data set.

The chi-square value for the SEM model was 193.76 ($df = 97$, $p < .05$). Although this chi-square value suggests that the SEM does not adequately fit the data, the chi-square value is often problematic because it is sensitive to sample size (Bentler, 1990; Bollen, 1989).[1] For this reason, researchers have argued the overall goodness-of-fit indexes are better indicators of model fit, especially in cases where there is a discrepancy between these indexes and the chi-square value. Therefore, this study's results suggest that the SEM model does represent the data well (RMSEA = .061, SRMR = .083, CFI = .95), and the remaining important indicator is close to a good fit (NNFI = .93). Overall, these indexes suggest an adequate fit of the SEM model to the data.

The results of the statistical tests for the individual paths, including magnitude and significance of the coefficients for the latent path model, are provided in Figure 2. Among the six relationship indicators, satisfaction most strongly and signifi-

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[1]The chi-square distribution is based on the statistical properties of T, and T is asymptotic. T is probably not chi-square distributed with small sample size and with lack of multivariate normality (Hu & Bentler, 1995). At the same time, large samples can result in exponential increases in the chi-square values, even when there are trivial differences between a hypothesized model and the sample data (Holbert & Stephenson, 2002).

TABLE 1
Correlation Coefficients and Descriptive Statistics for Observed Variables

Variables	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*	*13*	*14*	*15*	*16*	*17*
1. Trust 1	—																
2. Trust 2	.654	—															
3. Control mutuality 1	.311	.350	—														
4. Control mutuality 2	.269	.342	.700	—													
5. Commitment 1	.411	.439	.221	.172	—												
6. Commitment 2	.298	.286	.252	.175	.433	—											
7. Satisfaction 1	.376	.340	.504	.400	.415	.456	—										
8. Satisfaction 2	.341	.243	.534	.443	.288	.310	.724	—									
9. Communal relationship 1	.612	.508	.388	.294	.445	.454	.439	.405	—								
10. Communal relationship 2	.318	.266	.269	.210	.236	.213	.293	.220	.369	—							
11. Exchange relationship 1	.054	.006	.002	–.073	.105	.057	.013	.074	.091	–.166	—						
12. Exchange relationship 2	–.011	.005	–.086	–.117	.055	.031	–.078	–.038	–.019	–.228	.458	—					
13. Exchange relationship 3	.185	.107	.153	.047	.229	.187	.048	.063	.218	.036	.384	.484	—				
14. Attitude 1	.279	.222	.547	.473	.197	.263	.587	.516	.328	.191	–.029	–.072	.036	—			
15. Attitude 2	.252	.183	.529	.498	.129	.215	.537	.489	.278	.180	–.101	–.087	.024	.845	—		
16. Behavior Intention 1	.262	.229	.292	.181	.225	.337	.357	.343	.355	.173	.132	.062	.163	.372	.301	—	
17. Behavior Intention 2	.332	.294	.338	.262	.271	.476	.394	.374	.422	.201	.063	.006	.108	.411	.345	.721	—
M	4.09	3.80	4.41	4.25	4.71	5.00	5.12	4.70	4.15	3.56	4.30	4.18	4.47	5.36	5.32	5.64	5.86
SD	1.28	1.44	1.24	1.27	1.35	1.43	1.32	1.20	1.45	1.48	1.32	1.21	1.18	1.51	1.54	1.43	1.29
No. of valid cases	246.0																

Note. Trust 1 = ____ can be relied on to keep its promises to students; Trust 2 = students believe that ___ takes their opinions into account when making decisions; Control mutuality 1 = ___ believes the opinions of students are legitimate; Control mutuality 2 = ____ really listens to what students have to say; Commitment 1 = students can see that ____ wants to maintain a relationship with its students; Commitment 2 = there is a long-lasting bond between ______ and students; Satisfaction 1 = students are happy with ____; Satisfaction 2 = generally speaking, students are pleased with the relationship ______ has established with students; Communal relationship 1 = ____ is very concerned about the welfare of students; Communal relationship 2 = students feel that the university takes advantage of students who are vulnerable; Exchange relationship 1 = whenever ______ gives or offers something to students, it generally expects something in return; Exchange relationship 2 = even though students may have had a relationship with ____ for a long time, the university still expects something in return whenever it offers students a favor; Exchange relationship 3 = ____ will compromise with students when it knows that the university will gain something; Attitude 1 = like–dislike; Attitude 2 = positive–negative; Behavioral intention 1 = if I were to start college again, I would select ____; Behavioral intention 2 = I would recommend ____ to someone considering a new school; a blank line (____) indicates the name of the university.

TABLE 2
Goodness-of-Fit Indexes: Measurement Model and SEM Model

Models Fit and Criteria	*Measurement Model*	*SEM Model*
Chi-square (*df*)	149.68 (91)	193.76 (97)
RMSEA < .06	.049	.061
SRMR < .09	.053	.083
CFI > .95	.97	.95
NNFI > .95	.92	.93

Note. SEM = structural equation modeling; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standarized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; NNFI = nonnormed fit index.

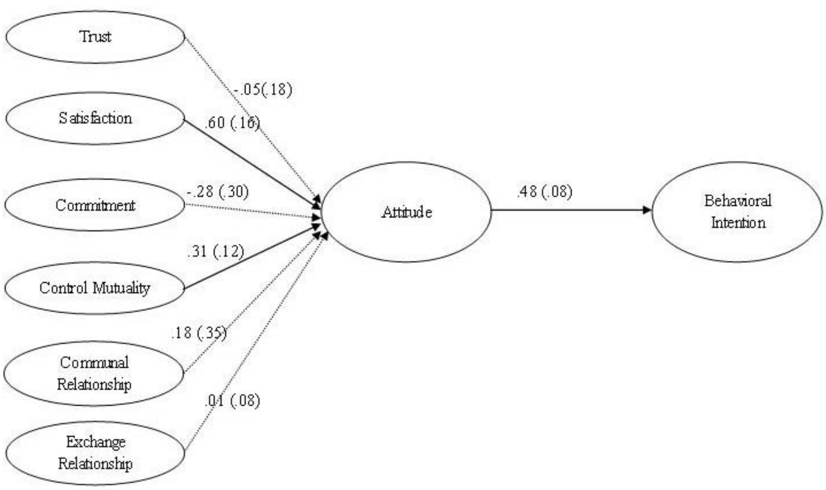

FIGURE 2 Results of the structural equation model. Dotted lines indicate nonsignificant paths. The numbers in parentheses indicate standardized error. $p < .05$.

cantly affected attitude, followed by control mutuality (.60 and .31, respectively; $p < .05$). The remaining relationship variables (trust, commitment, communal relationship, and exchange relationship) did not significantly affect attitude. Consistent with these findings, satisfaction and control mutuality indirectly and significantly affected behavioral intentions (indirect effects of satisfaction and control mutuality on behavioral intentions were .29 and .15; $p < .05$). The remaining relationship variables did not have significant indirect effects on behavioral intentions. Attitude strongly and significantly influenced behavioral intentions (.48; $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

This research effort was designed to empirically test a model that posited the linkages among perceptions of the OPRs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions toward an organization among members of a key public. The SEM that was tested yielded results that support some of the theoretical assumptions underlying the relationship management perspective for public relations theory and practice. At the same time, questions for future scholarship and relationship theory's application to practice are suggested by some of this study's unexpected findings.

The results presented here support the fundamental assumption of much of the relationship literature—that building and sustaining positive OPRs should be the public relations function's primary aim. These quality relationships have been assumed to drive supportive attitudes and behaviors toward the organization among strategic constituencies (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002). The connections documented in the model tested here are especially notable given how few studies in public relations have linked relationship perceptions to attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. The profound implications of these demonstrated links for public relations practice should be obvious given the field's historical struggle to measure its impact beyond getting the message out.

Among the six relationship indexes proposed by Hon and J. E. Grunig (1999), students' perceptions of relationship satisfaction were key to having a positive attitude toward the university. The findings also indicated that students with strong perceptions of satisfaction were more likely to select the same university if they were to start school again and also more likely to recommend their university to others.

These links imply that a public's satisfaction with the organization can engender positive attitudes and lead to supportive behaviors toward the organization. This study's results are consistent with Bruning's (2002) research, which examined the university–student relationship and found that attitudes toward the organization are different for returning students and those not returning to school. A stream of marketing research also has found satisfaction to be an important indicator of relationship quality and a predictor of customer attitudes and behaviors (Evans & Laskin, 1994; Fornell, 1992; Naude & Buttle, 2000; Ruyter, Moorman, & Lemmink, 2001; Sharma, Tzokas, Saren, & Kyziridis, 1999; Storbacka, Strandvik, & Gronroos, 1994; Strong, Ringer, & Taylor, 2001; Tellefsen, 2002).

The students who participated in this research are known as the "millennial" generation—those born in the 1980s and 1990s. They tend to consider education a high priority and report less free time, less time alone, more schoolwork, and more scheduled activities (according to Howe & Strauss, 2000). They also believe they are held to higher standards of behavior and achievement than Generation-Xers or Baby Boomers, yet they are less trusting of institutions and expect immediate, measurable outcomes (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Given these trends, universities are under more pressure to establish a satisfying relationship with this generation by meeting their expectations through maintenance strategies that capitalize on students' desire for accountability and goal-directed learning.

Perceptions of control mutuality also strongly affected students' attitudes toward the university. Positive attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the university clearly were influenced by students' perceptions of whether the students feel some degree of empowerment. These results suggest that two-way communication and organizations' ensuring that the voices of publics are acted on are key relationship maintenance strategies. However, making these strategies happen may be some organizations' biggest relationship challenge. Previous research has shown that perceptions of control mutuality were one of the weakest indicators among the six relationship indexes (Hon & Brunner, 2002). And, real-life examples abound where perceptions of disempowerment among a key public have led to strained relationships (e.g., see Walsh, 2005).

This study's findings suggest that students rated their perceptions of control mutuality relatively highly (mean scores of 4.41 and 4.25), indicating that students tend to agree that the power balance between students and the university meets their expectations. However, these results might be related to the characteristics of the respondents because more than 60% were juniors, seniors, or graduate students. Perhaps older students are more involved in activities where control mutuality between students and the university is an important relationship dimension (e.g., student government representative, president of a sorority or fraternity, etc.).

More research is needed to examine how control mutuality might vary, depending on the organization and public studied, and to what extent different levels of power balance are indicative of attitudes and behavioral intentions. It seems likely that control mutuality would be a stronger predictor of attitudes and behaviors in some relationships more than others. For example, control mutuality seems critical in understanding the politicized aspects of the relationship between an activist public and the organization being targeted. Control mutuality also may be a less relevant outcome of a relationship where there is no direct contact or face-to-face communication with an organization's management (e.g., many consumer company OPRs).

Although the overall model tested here represented a good fit with the data, some of the proposed theoretical paths among the individual constructs were not found in this data set. For example, perceptions of trust, commitment, communal relationship, and exchange relationship had no significant effects on attitudes and behavioral intentions. These results are surprising, especially for trust and commitment, given the prominence of these indicators in the public relations literature cited earlier as well as the marketing literature that focuses on the customer–organization relationship (e.g., see Claro, Hagelaar, & Omta, 2003; Crosby, Evans, & Cowles, 1990; Dion, Easterling, & Miller, 1995; Hult, Ferrell, Hurley, & Giunipero, 2000; Jeffries & Reed, 2000; Kothandaraman & Wilson, 2000; Miyamoto & Rexha, 2004; Payne, Holt, & Frow; 2001; Perrien, Paradis, & Banting, 1995; Shore & Barksdale, 1998).

Because the findings related to trust, commitment, communal relationship, and exchange relationship seem counterintuitive, measurement problems related to the OPR studied here—students and their university—may be a factor. Perhaps the items measuring communal relationships and exchange relationships, for example, are not reflective of students' attitude and behavioral intentions because students have not yet developed these relationship perceptions, which may be more complex and long term than those measuring current satisfaction. This may be especially true for the freshmen and sophomores, who make up 39% of the sample. Perceptions of communal and exchange relationships among alumni, for example, might be linked more strongly to behavioral intentions such as supporting the university (political, monetary) as these alumni become more aware of the university's broader role in the community and the university's expectation that alumni "give back."

Another explanation could be that the exchange–communal relationship typology used here is not exhaustive. Hung (2005) developed a more sophisticated continuum of relationship types and suggested that organizations tend to behave based on their determination of what types of relationship they want to establish with their publics. She characterized the educator–student relationship as "covenantal" whereby "both sides commit to a common good by their open exchanges and the norm of reciprocity" (p. 398). Participants provide each other the opportunity to ask for insight, to provide criticism, and to place a claim on the other party's time. In other words, the relationship is characterized by the obligation of each side to listen and respond. More qualitative research into types of relationships is needed to substantiate the efficacy of Hung's (2005) proposed continuum, and empirical measures should be developed for each relationship type.

Finally, the lack of support for several of the model's proposed paths could mean that some of the relationship variables are actually antecedents to others. Relationship theory in marketing has shown that trust might be a predictor of commitment (Kwon & Suh, 2004; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). And, previous research in public relations that measured the public relationship between Samsung Corporation and its retailers found that trust and control mutuality are predictors of satisfaction, which in turn is a predictor of commitment (Jo, 2003). Future research should explore alternative models that test possible horizontal linkages among the relationship indexes rather than assuming they work in concert simultaneously.

Limitations

Like any other research, this study has several limitations. Although many of this study's results are original and compelling, they should be interpreted with caution. First, a nonprobability convenience sample was used. Therefore, the findings of this research are not generalizable to the study's population, nor are the results generalizable to other publics and organizations involved in a public relationship. Much more research is needed to validate the efficacy of this study's measured connections among relationship perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions using a variety of other types of organizations and publics.

Second, the relationship perspective assumes a two-way model of public relations whereby understanding and measuring both sides of the relationship and its effects on both parties are key. However, this article measures the perspective of the public only. Other studies might look at the organization's perception of the relationship and how those perceptions are linked to attitudes and behaviors toward key publics among members of the organization.

In addition, this study did not determine how students' year in school might affect the results because the subgroups (freshmen, sophomores, etc.) would be too small for SEM analysis. It seems likely that the relationship perceptions of freshmen and seniors, for example, would be different because it takes time to form relationship perceptions (especially trust and commitment) and cultivate or nurture the relationship. Therefore, future research needs to examine how time may impact the variables measured here. Thomlison's (2000) work, which discusses several theories and models of relationship stages, offers guidance for understanding the dynamic nature of interpersonal relationships that may also apply to OPRs.

Documenting the linkages among relationship perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors is essential to understanding and measuring the value of public relations for organizations and society. We believe this study provides important, however tentative, insights into understanding the potential of relationship management for demonstrating the effectiveness of public relations.

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