

The Relation between Public Relations Roles and Public Relations Models in the Sport Associations in Thailand

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the relation between public relations roles and public relations models. A questionnaire was administered to public relations practitioners randomly selected from 60 sport associations in Thailand. A canonical correlation analysis was used; an examination of the loadings suggests that the first canonical variate seems to involve a relation between all roles and all dimensions whereas the second seems to capture a relation between the advisor, advocate and liaison roles and the two-way and mediated dimensions. It not only provides a ground for theorizing the findings, but also elucidates the topics to both academics and practitioners in the sport context.

Keywords: Public Relations, Canonical Correlation, Sport Association

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ความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบทบาทของการประชาสัมพันธ์ กับโมเดลการประชาสัมพันธ์ในสมาคมกีฬาในประเทศไทย

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเรื่องนี้มุ่งศึกษาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบทบาทของการประชาสัมพันธ์กับโมเดลการประชาสัมพันธ์ในสมาคมกีฬาในประเทศไทย ผู้วิจัยใช้แบบสอบถามในการเก็บข้อมูลจากผู้ที่ทำหน้าที่ประชาสัมพันธ์ที่เลือกโดยวิธีสุ่มจากสมาคมกีฬา 60 แห่งในประเทศไทย ผู้วิจัยวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลโดยหาสหสัมพันธ์ค่าโนนิคัล และพบว่าสหสัมพันธ์ของตัวแปรกลุ่มแรกจะท่อนความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบทบาททุกประเภทกับมิติทุกด้าน ในขณะที่ตัวแปรกลุ่มที่ 2 จะท่อนความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างบทบาทบางอย่าง ได้แก่ ที่ปรึกษา ผู้สนับสนุน และผู้ประสานงาน กับมิติบางด้าน ได้แก่ ส่องทางและการส่งผ่าน ผลจากการวิจัยนอกจากจะเป็นประโยชน์แก่การสร้างทฤษฎีที่เกี่ยวข้องกับบทบาทและโมเดลการประชาสัมพันธ์ ยังทำให้นักวิชาการและผู้ปฏิบัติงานด้านประชาสัมพันธ์ในบริบทการกีฬาได้เข้าใจประเด็นนี้ได้ชัดเจนขึ้น

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Sports have been affected by social, cultural, political, legal, and technological elements among a myriad of environmental factors. Sport entities function indispensably in alignment with sports; they have no choice but to be so impacted. Public relations as an organizational function, whether or not it is formally acknowledged as such, facilitates the execution of the organizational plan and goals.

According to Stoldt, Dittmore and Branvold (2006), sport public relations is a managerial communication-based function designed to identify a sport organization's key public segments, evaluate its relationships with those segments, and foster desirable relationships between a sport organization and those segments. Therefore the public relations personnel in the organization play a vital role in carrying out this function --- with a view to contributing to business development of sport. The public relations role of in-house employees can thus never be taken for granted.

Literature Review

Public relations, as a profession, has a relatively short history; thus, the roles of public relations are still under extensive study. According to Hopwood (2005), the position of communicators in organizations involves high levels of role ambiguity. In fact, Ryan and Martinson (1983) reported that practitioners often disagree about what public relations is or should be. Role ambiguity could lead to discrepancy in role expectation between public relations practitioners and top management (Dozier, 1992). As a result, role ambiguity is possibly associated with role conflict and, in turn, practitioners' job dissatisfaction (Pratt, 1991).

Many often conceptualize a public relations practitioner's roles by looking at the activities rather than the purposes of the activities in light of the organization's public relations (i.e., what their public relations effort accomplishes). When previous role studies mentioned "public relations roles," it was not clear whether they were referring to the roles that relate to the public relations function or any kind of activities that public relations practitioners carry out regardless of the nature of the public relations function.

Public relations practitioners are often referred to as boundary spanners. In public relations literature, a practitioner's role as a boundary spanner has been primarily focused on the information processing aspect, i.e., environment scanning involving information

gathering (Walker, Brewer, Boyne, & Avellaneda, 2011). Meanwhile, in the management literature, boundary spanning is conceptualized as a set of activities that involve representing and information processing (L'Etang, 2006). At least three distinct roles that capture different aspects of boundary spanning are advocate, communication liaison, and monitor.

In sport organizations, the role that public relations is playing is widely misunderstood. Some sport management authors have argued that public relations support the marketing function of the organization. This viewpoint is understandable because of the overwhelming use of public relations as an aspect of marketing in sport organizations.

Advocacy has been the integral part of public relations ever since its emergence (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997); therefore, the role of advocate has been traditionally considered as the most generic activities of public relations. This role involves delivering the organization's viewpoint and presenting the organization in a favorable way to the target stakeholders in order to create favorable attitudes toward the organization. The advocate role was identified in the Leichty and Springston's (1996) study. In their conceptualization, the advocate role focuses on disseminating favorable information about the organization and representing the organization.

The communication liaison role focuses on delivering the views of key publics to top management and employees. Broom and Smith's (1979) study termed this role as communication facilitator role and conceptualized it as a middleman facilitating communication between the top management and the publics. A public relations unit acting as a communication liaison keep organizational members of abreast opinions of key publics and creates opportunities for organization members to hear the views of key publics (Boyd & Stahley, 2008). In Dozier's (1984) study, the communication liaison role emerged as a minor role separate from the manager role. In his study, practitioners who perform as a communication liaison were characterized as specializing in linking communication between management and publics, but excluded from management decision making.

The monitor role in this study is conceptualized in terms of informational boundary spanning activities that involve gathering, selecting, and relaying information from the

environment to organization members. Leichty and Springston's (1996) and Springston and Leichty's (1994) concept of informational boundary spanning activities captures the monitor role. The roles activities identified in their studies, such as gatekeeping, information acquisition, and formal research, all concerns of the public relations practitioner's role to monitor organizational environments and stakeholders' opinions.

Roles concerning the decision making process include public relations advisor, disturbance handler, and activist. The roles in this category primarily concern influencing certain aspects of an organization's decision making processes.

When public relations personnel play a role as an advisor, they provide top management with solutions regarding how to handle an organization's public relations problems and advise top management on various organizational issues/policies from the public relations standpoint. The advisor role is conceptualized as the problem-solving facilitator role in Broom and Smith's (1979) study. A similar role dimension also appeared in Moss, Wamaby & Newman (2005) study. Their key policy and strategy advisor role captures this role dimension.

An important characteristic of the advisor role is engaging the top management regarding the public relations problem-solving process. Public relations personnel which successfully perform the advisor role "help management systematically think through organizational communication and public relations problems to solutions" (Dozier, 1992, p. 330).

The importance of advisor role performance is obvious when we consider the role of the dominant coalition in an organization's public relations practices. The study suggests that public relations' participation in decision making contributes to an organization's excellence in public relations (Grunig, 2002). By playing a role as an advisor to top management, public relations personnel are more likely to influence an organization's decision making processes.

The expert prescriber role is described with the activities of providing answers to public relations questions to the management and organization members. This role is often referred to being analogous to the doctor-patient relationship (Broom & Smith, 1979). Moss et al.'s (2005) problem solver role resembles the concept of the expert prescriber. Public relations training role also could be seen as a similar concept as their public

relations training role concerns providing public relations-related skills to other organization members (Leichty & Springston, 1996; Wahlberg, 2004).

Previous research suggests that practitioners' expertise is an important factor for empowerment of the public relations function (Grunig, 2002). Knowledge base, such as expertise in evaluation methods and environmental scanning techniques, is necessary in order to create a demand-supply loop between the public relations function and top management (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995). Therefore, serving as an expert on the organization's public relations problems is deemed a critical aspect of public relations roles.

In the original conceptualization by Broom & Smith (1979), the primary difference between expert prescriber and advisor roles lies in the level of involvement of management in public relations problems and solutions. In the expert prescriber role, practitioners take a lead on the organization's public relations, while management rather passively follows the practitioners' advice. On the other hand, the advisor role encourages top management to engage in the public relations problem solving process.

While public and research attention usually focuses on the financial, political, social and even personal aspects of the sport industry, public relations has not won similar attention. In fact, the attention to sport public relations has been somewhat sporadic (L'Etang & Hopwood, 2008), and particularly the linkage between the role and the public relations model is an under-investigated subject.

The role of the public relations in sport organizations has received little attention in public relations literature and in reality. Thailand has over 60 sport associations registered with the Sport Authority of Thailand. Some are of professional nature; others are intended for amateur members. Public relations is an indispensable function in these not-for-profit organizations in that it contributes to public recognition and the extent to which it brings about funding and athlete success. This study aims to explore what public relations roles should be enacted and how they are in line with the public relations models in managing the organizations. The research hypothesis is that the public relations roles and the public relations models are related.

Method

The survey research design was employed since it aimed to explore associations between unmanipulated variables and was not set up in an experimental setting. The respondents were selected randomly from a list of the employees working either primarily or temporarily in public relations for the sport associations in Thailand. The sample size of 392 was calculated at the confidence level of 95%, with a 0.2 margin of error and a 2.02 standard deviation. The survey was distributed either electronically or personally, and 93% of them were returned in approximately one month.

The instrument consisted of three parts, all of which had been explored and validated by factor analysis at an early stage. The first part involved roles of public relations (defined as services provided or processes influenced by public relations); the second part concerned organizations' practices of public relations models (defined as value, goals and behaviors held by organizations when they practice public relations), and the third part had to do with respondents' demographics. The scales, however, were assessed for content validity which was found favorable, and for internal reliability which was found adequate (Cronbach $\alpha = .64-.81$) according to Kline (1998).

The first part is a 35-item, 5-point measure of the public relations roles taps into seven roles; namely, activist, advisor, prescriber, coordinator, advocate, liaison, and monitor. The second part is a 35-item, 5-point measure of the public relations models taps into seven factors along the four dimensions; namely, direction (one-way and two-way communication), intention (symmetrical and asymmetrical communication), ethical communication, and channel (interpersonal and mediated communication). The last part is where the respondents were asked to respond to questions about gender, age, job rank, experience in public relations, and tenure with the organization, work responsibility, and level of education.

The data were checked for its entirety and suitability for a later choice of canonical analysis. In order to explore the relation between public relations roles and public relations models, canonical correlation was conducted. The assumption of linearity, multivariate normality, and homoscedasticity were checked by evaluating a bivariate scatterplot of the canonical variate scores. To verify the existence of the relation, both the full canonical model and its effect size were examined for its statistical

significance. Then, the variates generated by the analysis were assessed, and finally, the statistical significance of the full canonical model together with its effect size was examined with multiple indices.

Results

The average age of the respondents was 29 ($SD = 3.4$). They were predominantly women (68%), in the position of assistant manager (69%), administrative assistants (22%), and senior manager or higher (9%). On average, the respondents have worked for their organization for 5.6 years. Most of the respondents (79%) had no prior work experience in public relations. Approximately half of the respondents (48%) performed public relations work as their main function. Most of the respondents (96%) held at least a bachelor's degree; merely a small number of respondents (5%) have received a degree in public relations or a related field. Some of the respondents (23%) earned or were pursuing a graduate degree.

The first canonical correlation was .65 (42% overlapping variance); the second was .37 (14% overlapping variance). With both canonical correlations included, $\chi^2(8, N = 392) = 46.18, p < .001$, and with the first removed, $\chi^2(8, N = 392) = 13.34, p < .001$. The correlations and canonical coefficients are included in Table 1.

In the first variate, all dimensions of public relations model were highly related to the first canonical variate of public relations models; that is, asymmetry ($r(390) = .71, p < .001$), ethical ($r(390) = .76, p < .001$), two-way ($r(390) = .82, p < .001$), one-way ($r(390) = .57, p < .001$), interpersonal ($r(390) = .68, p < .001$), and mediated ($r(390) = .63, p < .001$). Therefore, the first canonical variate produced reflects a two-way mixed-motive public relations model.

As for the public relations roles, the correlations for all seven public relations roles were greater than .70; that is, activist ($r(390) = .75, p < .001$), advisor ($r(390) = .71, p < .001$), expert prescriber ($r(390) = .81, p < .001$), coordinator ($r(390) = .61, p < .001$), advocate ($r(390) = .74, p < .001$), liaison ($r(390) = .81, p < .001$), and monitor ($r(390) = .79, p < .001$). Therefore, the first canonical variate reflected balanced performance across all public relations roles. The public relations roles were all positively related to the first canonical variate of public relations model.

Taken together the correlations for the first variate from both variable sets, the first variate reflected a positive relation between high level of performance in all the seven roles and two-way mixed-motive public relations models. In other words, in organizations practicing two-way mixed-motive public relations models (i.e., higher level of activities across all the dimensions of the public relations models), the public relations official were more likely to perform all the seven roles.

In the second variate, the dimensions that were highly relevant to the second canonical variate are asymmetric ($r(390) = .37, p < .001$), two-way ($r(390) = .41, p < .001$), interpersonal ($r(390) = .31, p < .001$) and mediated ($r(390) = .60, p < .001$). All dimensions were positively related to the second variate, suggesting that the second canonical variate of the public relations model reflected the public relations model.

As for public relations roles, the second canonical variate were highly related to liaison ($r(390) = .49, p < .001$), advocate ($r(390) = .46, p < .001$), and advisor ($r(390) = .43, p < .001$). The correlation for liaison was the highest so this second canonical covariate of public relations roles seemed to reflect liaison-oriented role performance.

When the correlations from both variable sets were taken together, the second variate suggested that organizations practicing the one-way asymmetric public relations model were more likely to have public relations personnel that played a role as an advocate for the organizations, but were less likely to act as advisor, coordinator, liaison, or activist.

Table 1: Correlations and Standardized Canonical Coefficients between Public Relations Roles and Public Relations Models and their Canonical Variates

Variable	First variate		Second variate	
	Correlation	Canonical Coefficient	Correlation	Canonical Coefficient
Public Relations Roles				
Activist	.75	.22	.11	.03
Advisor	.70	.09	.43	.45
Prescriber	.81	.23	.04	.38
Coordinator	.60	.01	.28	.28
Advocate	.74	.26	.45	.68
Liaison	.80	.32	.49	.75
Monitor	.78	.30	.06	.33
Public Relations Models				
Symmetric	.84	.57	.38	.68
Asymmetric	.71	.17	.37	.58
One-way	.76	.33	.10	.06
Two-way	.81	.42	.41	.57
Ethical	.56	.08	.16	.07
Interpersonal	.67	.08	.31	.42
Mediated	.63	.26	.60	.68

Discussion

The primary purpose of the present study was to explore the relation between public relations roles and public relations models. Overall, several of our findings were consistent with prior research. The analysis revealed the critical role of public relations personnel in a sport association's public relations practices. Depending on the type of public relations roles performed, an organization's public relations model would differ, also suggested by Leichty and Springston (1996). Specifically, as public relations personnel perform all seven roles, their organizations also were more likely to practice all four dimensions of public relations models, as hypothesized. On the other hand, when public relations personnel focus more on the advocate role while focusing less on the

liaison, coordinator, and advisor roles, public relations practices were more likely to be oriented toward asymmetric, one-way, and mediated communication compared with two-way, interpersonal, and ethical communication. This is consistent with Wahlberg (2004) and Leichty & Springston (1996).

Generalization of this study's findings is limited to not-for-profit sport organizations; they are not applicable in different settings, esp. business enterprises where public relations personnel assume more diverse roles such as sales and marketing as asserted by Gruning (2000), or in sport associations in other countries.

Future public relations research will benefit from exploring the complex relation among organizational characteristics, public relations role performance, and outcome variables. For example, while advocate and activist roles were strong predictors of desirable organizational value as perceived by public relations personnel, the relation may depend on the management philosophy and environmental complexity.

We can examine an individual's behavior which might result in his or her fulfillment of the public relations roles (Broom & Smith, 1979). These can serve as various moderating and mediating variables in the relation between public relations roles and models. This would add another level of sophistication to public relations role theories.

Apart from public relations role performance as a variable, others could be explored, esp. those from the perspective of primary publics. It is important to show how public relations roles make a difference in an organization's behavior and in turn contributes to the organization's reputation and performance. The roles of public relations are expected to be expressed in the organization's behavior and ultimately affect public perception and attitude toward the organizations.

Since the roles of public relations personnel proved to be characterized by that of an activist, an advisor, a prescriber, a coordinator, an advocate, a liaison, and a monitor, it was recommended that such individuals in a typical sport association should take all those roles to facilitate the operation of their organization in achieving its organizational objective.

Qualitative research techniques such as face-to-face or focus group interviews designed to supplement the quantitative data already collected and analyzed, may be

applied to probe perceptions of public relations personnel toward their functions. The findings of the study may provide insights as to the factors most influencing the sport public relations professionals' career.

Finally, replication studies in a different context is advisable in the future. A researcher may take into account the social and cultural factors that influence the types of public relations roles and the level of role performance. Cross-national comparison will help to build a theory that has universal significance.

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