

# Engagement in public relations discipline: Themes, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches

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## Abstract

Several practitioners and experts in the field of public relations have emphasized the importance of public engagement in the context of new technological and social developments and the impact this has on reshaping and reconceptualising public relations. While the practice is embracing new trends, the questions of understanding, explaining and managing engagement of different publics appear to be largely unexplored in public relations discipline. The purpose of this study is to examine the state of public engagement studies in public relations scholarship in terms of themes, contexts, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. The study conducted content analysis of 59 journal articles on public engagement published in the last decade in *Journal of Communication Management*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Public Relations Inquiry* and *Public Relations Review*. The results indicate that scarce studies on public engagement tend to be mostly concerned with social media and online engagement, studied from management/functional and relational perspectives, focussed on organizations, anchored in western traditions and dominated by quantitative methodology. This indicates that public engagement tends to be conceptualized as a phenomenon that organizations need to “manage” to advance their interests rather than to understand in terms of dynamics,

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connectedness, participation, dialogue, and interactions with publics. It is strongly influenced by post-positivism with some encouraging evidence of paradigmatic turn towards socio-cultural and critical approaches.

**Keywords:** Engagement; public relations discipline; functionalism; socio-cultural turn; scholarly themes; methodology.

### 1. Introduction

Several practitioners and experts in the field of public relations have emphasized the increasing importance of engagement in the context of new technological and social developments (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016; Johnston, 2014). Indeed, “BledCom 2016 Call for Papers” (2016) opened with the following:

In 2008, Richard Edelman, president and CEO of Edelman, the largest independent public relations agency in the world, stated that public engagement is the future of public relations. Eight years later, how much of that future has come to life?

There are strong indicators that engagement has emerged as an important concept with a high potential to reshape and re-conceptualize public relations (Kang, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014). As “stakeholders challenge the discourse of organizational primacy and organizations prioritize the need for authentic stakeholder involvement” (Johnston, 2014, p.381), building culture and cultivating engagement became one of the central tasks of public relations. The importance of engagement has been further enhanced by technological development of digital media, especially social media, which provide seemingly unlimited opportunities for publics to become engaged with organizations, content and each other (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). In increasingly participatory culture, publics expect to collaborate with organizations and take an active role in communication and co-production of meaning. As such, engagement has been recognized as a critical foundation of organizational success in the formation of relationships with their publics, as well as for public relations to contribute to a fully functioning society (de Bussy, 2010; Heath, 2006).

While the practice is embracing engagement as a crucial driver of change, it tends to be under-researched, undertheorized and inadequately addressed in public relations scholarship (de Bussy, 2010; Devin & Lane, 2014; Welch, 2011). Several questions, including the

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questions of definitions and meaning of engagement; understanding, explaining and managing engagement of different publics (e.g. employees, communities, media, consumers, activists); reasons and motives for people's engagement as well as disengagement; digital engagement; grassroots democracy; institutional response; as well as ways, in which individuals and groups can use the new technologies to communicate their concerns about different organizations and to mobilise others to action, still appear to be largely unexplored in public relations scholarship. This lack of attention to publics, social dynamics and culture can be seen as symptomatic of general trends in public relations discipline, which has until recently been dominated by functionalist paradigm and normative theories with a focus on organizational communication, public relations profession and how it can benefit organizations (Edwards, 2016; Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006). Over the past 15 years these have been importantly challenged by the socio-cultural turn, shifting "the ontological and epistemological focus of the field towards socially constructed nature of practice, process and outcomes" (Edwards & Hodges, 2011, p.3), yet there is a question to what extent these shifts redirected scholarly attention from (powerful) organizations to publics and public engagement.

The purpose of this study is to examine what is the state of public engagement studies in public relations scholarship in terms of themes, contexts, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. By combining all these areas, the study represents one of the first attempts at providing a comprehensive overview of trends in engagement research. Content analysis of academic articles on engagement published over the last decade in key public relations journals was conducted. Besides looking at the state of engagement studies, this paper is also seeking to establish if the studies of engagement have embraced and/or enhanced a paradigmatic shift in the field of public relations from traditionally organization-focussed functionalism to socio-cultural and critical approaches. Given the nature of the public engagement with a primary focus on stakeholders' and publics' role in organizational

communication, such shift would not only be welcome, but also expected.

### 2. Engagement in public relations scholarship

Engagement first appeared as a theoretical concept in public relations literature in the 1990s with early studies focusing on cognitive involvement in campaigns and community capacity building (Johnston, 2014). More than two decades after and enhanced by new technological and social developments, engagement is considered as a “game-changer” and underpins much of the relational and public communication research with growing literature, special journal issues, edited volumes and conferences dedicated exclusively to this topic. According to Hutchins and Tindall (2016), high-engagement publics fundamentally challenge traditional public relations theoretical assumptions and models, including the situational theory of publics, and redefine the purpose and practice of public relations. In a similar manner, Johnston (2014) heralded engagement “as a new paradigm for public relations in the 21st century [...], challenging and contributing to the zeitgeist of public relations functionalist, instrumentalist, and critical foundations.” (p.381) However, de Bussy (2010) observes that albeit engaging with stakeholders should be one of the most important theoretical concepts of public relations, the fundamental issues, including the definitions and operationalization of engagement as well as the revaluation of traditional public relations models remain largely unexplored. Public relations scholarship has most often discussed the possibilities of engagement using social media, but even in this area research has not truly explained how exactly engagement is created or the outcomes and effects it has on Organization-Public Relationships (OPRs) (Saxton & Waters, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

#### 2.1. Definitions and conceptualizations of engagement

Albeit widely and regularly used in public relations literature, engagement is rarely defined or clearly operationalized (Devin & Lane, 2014; Kang, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

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The concept tends to be treated vaguely, surrounded by confusion and used inconsistently (sometimes as a synonym for interaction, commitment, involvement, participation, relationships, dialogue, two-way or even one-way communication). Curtin (2012) relates such confusions to rare acknowledgement of paradigmatic and philosophical assumptions underpinning scholarly work in inherently multi-paradigmatic public relations field, resulting in what Kuhn (1996) called *semantic incommensurability*. This implies that engagement acquires different meanings in post-positivist (e.g. as an essentialists and measurable concept), postmodern (e.g. as a fluid notion constructed through discourse), constructivist (e.g. as a socially constructed activity and what it means to convey culture) and critical (e.g. as reinforcing or undermining power structures) paradigms. If we additionally accept public relations as a global field with diverse cultural meanings and add *cultural incommensurability* to Kuhn's semantic one, then an agreement on unified definition and meaning is simply impossible (Curtin, 2012).

In public relations, there are various debates on fundamental nature of engagement. Devin and Lane (2014) define engagement “as a psychologically motivated affective state that brings voluntary extra-role behaviors, and is characterized by affective commitment, positive affectivity and empowerment that an individual public experiences in interactions with an organization over time.” (p.402) Taylor and Kent (2014), on the other hand, position engagement within dialogue theory and conceptualize it as (2012) a “part of dialogue and through engagement, organizations and publics can make decisions that create social capital. Engagement is both an orientation that influences interactions and the approach that guides the process of interactions among groups.” (p.384) However, Motion, Haar, and Leitch (2012) to an extent disagree, when they propose that engagement should not be conflated with dialogical approaches; it is rather “a core concept for a public relations philosophy grounded in notions of mutually beneficial relationships [...], which takes into account the multiple assumptions, values, emotions, beliefs and visions that publics [...] may

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hold.” (p.54) Engagement involves publics in agenda setting, decision making and policy formation and as such extends beyond dialogue.

This brief overview indicates that in public relations engagement is considered as good, important and desirable for organizations and publics, but still without a clear consensus of what engagement actually means. This might, on the one hand, signify maturity of the field (Curtin, 2012), but, on the other hand, indicate inadequate scholarly engagement with explication and definition of the concept, hindering coherent theory development (Broom, 2006; Devin & Lane, 2014).

### 2.2. Themes of engagement

In their review of public relations literature, Taylor and Kent (2014) demonstrate that the term engagement has been studied under five different types of communication contexts:

1. **Social media** and how they facilitate communication and engagement have received most attention. Devin and Lane (2014) critically observe that engagement in this context has often been equated with “likes”, leaving comments or tweeting about a company or a process for organizations to involve publics in various aspects of organizational activities. It is thus often understood as one-way communication, attracting or holding someone’s attention or as a tool of persuasion rather than participatory or interactive engagement (Taylor & Kent, 2014).
2. **Employee engagement** theme explores engagement in the workplace and how organizations engage their employees. Engaged workers are thought to be more motivated, loyal and satisfied with their work (Kang, 2014; Welch, 2011). Hence, “engagement in this literature is slightly instrumental as scholars link employee engagement to increased productivity and vigilance on the job” (Taylor & Kent,

2014, p. 386).

3. **CSR and engagement** theme is equated with doing good deeds and interacting with the community. Transparency, scrutiny and accountability, central to CSR, encourage interactions between organizations and publics and provide a context that enables engagement.
4. **Civic engagement and social capital** focuses on how engagement works to build social capital, improve communities and promote democracy. It moves away from serving organizational interests to serving as a progressive force in solving community problems and enabling fully functioning society (Heath, 2006).
5. **Dialogic engagement** theme draws on dialogic approach to public relations to ensure ethical communication, which assumes that publics are consulted in matters that influence them and that they are willing and able to articulate their views to organizations.

Based on their review, Taylor and Kent (2014) conclude:

First, most of the evidence about engagement shows that it has been enacted as a form of one-way communication. Second, most articles describe engagement from an organizational perspective. Virtually all studies describe how organizations work to engage publics, and attempt to show how engagement may help to build relationships. Similarly, engagement is often viewed as a verb or action that is somehow beyond the routine communication behaviors of organizations. In other words, organizations have to make a conscious effort to do something special to engage publics. (p.386)

Similarly, McComas (2010) observes a focus on instrumental and normative rather than substantive engagement in public relations. A large proportion of scholarship is interested in “managing” engagement strategically, finding ways to effectively and positively engage

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organizational stakeholders, and building effective relationships with them for organizational benefits (Devin & Lane, 2014; Kang, 2014). In addition, several studies are designed as a way to solve engagement “problem”, manage conflicts or crisis, defuse activists and agitators and thus primarily interested in damage control (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). Heath (in Johnston, 2014, pp.381–382) questioned the role of engagement in serving purely organizational interests and emphasized the role of engagement in contribution to a fully functioning society.

What seems to be even more problematic is that unlike in other neighboring disciplines “public as the agents of experiencing engagement has been completely absent in the discussion of engagement in public relations.” (Devin & Lane, 2014, pp.400–401). In political, media and cultural studies, for example, the “focus is increasingly shifting from understanding organizational, or supply side, to the usage and dimension of citizen engagement” (Koc-Michalska, Lilleker, & Vedel, 2016, p.1807). Similar trends of exploring and empowering the role of public engagement in interactive participatory deliberations, co-construction of meanings, socially situated understandings and collective decision-making are observed in science and technology (Powell & Colin, 2008; Stirling, 2008) as well as in employee studies (Welch, 2011). This seems to confirm the assumption that public relations is not attuned with intellectual currents in other disciplines (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006; Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009; McKie, 2001).

### 2.3. Trends in public relations discipline surrounding engagement

Normative and instrumental emphasis with organizational orientation is symptomatic of general trends in public relations academia. From its beginnings, public relations has been a functional discipline, until recently dominated by management perspective and normative theories, particularly excellence theory (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006; Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009; Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010). This encouraged the understanding of public relations as

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“a management oriented communication practice that can be strategically planned, tactically executed and empirically evaluated.” (Bentele & Wehmeier, 2009, p.341). The paradigmatic focus on excellence was central to establishing public relations as an independent discipline and a strong agenda-setter in guiding public relations research, which as a side effect resulted in concentration of topics and reproduction rather than production of knowledge (Holtzhausen, 2000; Pasadeos et al., 2010).

At the beginning of the new millennium, alternative theoretical and methodological approaches exploring the complexity of communication and relationships emerged. They started moving the field forward in what Edwards and Hodges (2011) called a socio-cultural turn in public relations. These perspectives and theories, including critical, cultural, rhetorical, feminist and social, albeit well established in the discipline, still do not receive the same level of attention as normative research (Edwards, 2016). However, their deviation from the dominant excellence paradigm is particularly relevant for the area of engagement as it increased scholarly interest in the concept (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Despite these developments, there is little evidence of a shift in attention from (powerful) organizations to publics and public engagement in public relations discipline. In their bibliographic study, Pasadeos et al. (2010) note that the field very much remains focused on organizations and “could devote more attention to audiences and stakeholders who not only receive communications from organizations but who are able today to rapidly communicate and interact with organizations and other publics” (p.153). Indeed, engagement is not present among the most popular topics of research, which include international studies, new technologies, crisis communication research, gender studies, and ethics and social responsibility (Meadows & Meadows, 2014; Pasadeos et al., 2010; Pasadeos, Lamme, Gower, & Tian, 2011).

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Public relations discipline has additionally been criticized for being anchored in western philosophy, models of practice and knowledge derived mostly of western experiences (Hatherell & Bartlett, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000). Sriramesh (2012) highlights that “the public relations body of knowledge has developed and continues to develop ethnocentrically.” (p.10). Public relations has the most developed institutional base in the US with the vast majority of leading public relations authors (26 in top 30) (Pasadeos et al., 2010) and two most prominent journals in the field – *Journal of Public Relations Research* and *Public Relations Review* based there (Pompper, 2006). Despite recent diversifications of the field and encouraging advancement of culturally situated public relations scholarship in Europe, Asia-Pacific region and Latin America, the field is “woefully lacking in non-western paradigmatic approaches”, including eastern thought and other cultural perspectives, and “the concomitant conceptual richness they could bring to bear on our understanding” (Curtin, 2012, p.41).

### 2.4. Methodological approaches in public relations

Similar to its thematic and geographical narrowness, public relations has also been critiqued for methodological insularity and “old fashioned” methodological approaches. Public relations is dominated by post-positivistic paradigm and quantitative research under the assumption that this assures the field to be taken more seriously (Curtin, 2012). Quantitative methods are considered as a “formal” approach to data gathering, because they are “controlled”, “systematic”, “neutral” and value-free scientific observations (Pompper, 2006). As a consequence, the field is dominated by a short-term oriented quantitative research with surveys, content analysis and experiments as most commonly used research methods (McKie, 2001; Ruñ 1, 2008). However, Pasadeos et al. (2011) and Pompper (2006) in their methodological reviews of public relations research demonstrate the opposite, i.e. prevalence of qualitative methods.

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Qualitative research and interpretivistic approaches are seen as “informal”, “standard-lacking” and “subjective” (Pompper, 2006). These assumptions indicate that public relations has not entirely got to terms with interpretativistic paradigmatic shift in social sciences. They embraced interpretativism with realization that it sheds a new light on important phenomena, including relationships, culture and meaning-making, all of which are at the heart of public relations in general and engagement in particular (L’Etang, 2011). Qualitative research has been further enhanced by the above mentioned socio-cultural turn, bringing methodological frameworks of feminism, postmodernism and critical theory into the field (Edwards & Hodges, 2011; Holtzhausen, 2000). The methods of enquiry mostly consist of interviews, focus groups, case studies, ethnography and historical/comparative analysis (Cutler, 2004; Pasadeos et al., 2011).

While both epistemologies currently co-exist in public relations literature, there is also an increased presence of pragmatism with mixed-methods and triangulation research designs (Pasadeos et al., 2011). This approach uses “divergent methods to enhance the validity of results by mitigating method bias” (Pompper, 2006, p. 12), which according to Morse (2003) might not necessarily act as a strength, particularly when combining qualitative and quantitative methods, underpinned by very different and in many ways contradicting ontological and epistemological assumptions. Nevertheless, attention to triangulation and synthesis of methods has grown in public relations, yet it still represents a small proportion of research (Pasadeos et al., 2011; Pompper, 2006).

Given the status of the field, several calls have been made to decentralize and diversify research areas, themes, perspectives and methods beyond post-positivistic paradigm, organization-focused approach and western experience (Ihlen & van Ruler, 2009; Sriramesh, 2012). This raises a question: “what would a non-western, non-managerial and nonrationalist

form of public relations look like?” (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p.182) Some scholars believe that the discipline would lose its focus or even disappear, while others emphasize that we need to expand the horizons, put more emphasis on publics and stakeholders and address the role of public relations in culture and society; calls that have also been echoing in the area of engagement (Devin & Lane, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

### 3. Method

With the purpose to examine themes, contexts, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches of engagement in public relations scholarship, this study conducted quantitative content analysis of journal articles on public engagement published between 2006 and 2015. The study included four premier public relations journals: *Journal of Communication Management (JCM)*, *Journal of Public Relations Research (JPRR)*, *Public Relations Inquiry (PRI)* and *Public Relations Review (PRR)*. US-based PRR founded in 1975 and JPRR first published in 1989 represent the leading journals in the field and the benchmark for scholarship in public relations (Pompper, 2006), while the newer European journals JCM and PRI, established in 1996 and 2012, respectively, “broaden the opportunity for inclusion of more diverse voices and perspectives” (Pasadeos et al., 2010, p.154). The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. In which geographical contexts is public engagement studied?
2. What are the themes that can be found in public engagement related studies?
3. What perspectives and theoretical approaches is public engagement studied from?
4. What methodological approaches and methods are used to study public engagement?

3.1. Sampling strategy, coding and analysis

Engagement remains scarcely present in public relations journals (see Table 1). Due to low number of articles, the study opted for complete collection sampling strategy and included all 59 articles on public engagement published in the above mentioned journals over the ten-year period. The articles were included in the sample if the term “engagement”, referring to various forms of public engagement (e.g. stakeholder, employee, community, civic, citizen, social), was mentioned in the article’s title, abstract or keywords. Articles that addressed topics of organizational or media engagement were not included in the sample. Excluded from the sample were also book reviews and research in brief.

**Table 1:** Number of articles on public engagement in selected journals 2006 – 2015.

<b>Journal</b>	<b>Articles on engagement (n)</b>	<b>Articles total (N)</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
JCM	16	235	6.8%
JPRR	12	214	5.6%
PRI	2	67	3.0%
PRR	29	587	4.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>1.103</b>	<b>5.3%</b>

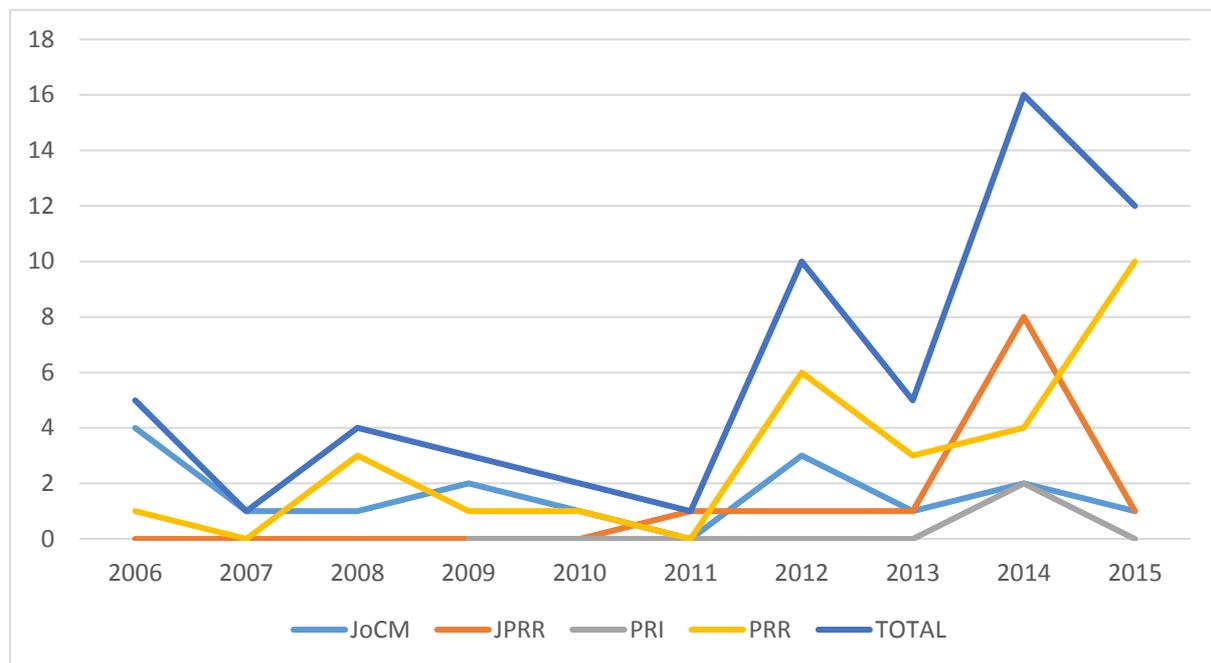
Each article, with a particular attention to abstract and method sections, was coded in terms of type (discussion, empirical or introspective); geographical context (according to affiliation of the author(s) and geographical context studied); studied themes; mentioned theories; perspective; focus (organizations or publics); methodological approach; and methods used. The articles were coded by the author and one third of the sample (using systematic random sampling) was coded by the 2nd coder. Inter-coder reliability was between 0.833 and 1.0. A relatively small sample with high variability in data sets allowed for merely descriptive statistical analysis conducted with SPSS.

### 4. Findings and discussion

Despite the topic of public engagement not receiving a significant attention in public relations journals, there is a noticeable increase in published studies since 2012 with publications peaking in 2014 (see Fig. 1). Almost half of the articles were published in PRR, which also publishes the highest volume of research amongst the four journals, while the relative proportion of engagement studies was the highest in JCM (see Table 1). The newest of the journals PRI published the lowest number of articles in absolute and relative terms ( $n = 2$ , representing 3.0% of the articles published in this journal). Given its young status, this is understandable, yet still somewhat unexpected, when considering that its purpose to stimulate new research agendas in the field of public relations, interdisciplinary investigations, emerging works of social theory, critical and cultural perspectives, and humanitarian agendas (L'Etang, Xifra, & Coombs, 2012) is particularly suited to the concept of engagement.

Three quarters of the articles (76.3%,  $n = 45$ ) were based on empirical studies using scientific research methods of inquiry, while discussion articles (15.3%,  $n = 9$ ) focusing on theorization and conceptualization of engagement and introspective studies (8.5%,  $n = 5$ ) examining the status and development of public relations discipline or practice (Pavlik, 1987) represented a minority. The high proportion of empirical studies in the field of engagement is encouraging, yet scarcity of meta-analyses, discussion and introspective studies raises concern. These studies are vital for clarifications and operationalization of idiographic concept of engagement as well as for monitoring growth and trends in research directions, reflecting on scholarly efforts, critical analysis, identification of gaps and future development (Meadows & Meadows, 2014; Pasadeos et al., 2011; Pompper, 2006).

**Figure 1:** Number of articles on public engagement in selected journals 2006 – 2015.



#### 4.1. Geographical contexts of engagement studies

In line with scholarly observations of ethnocentricity in public relations field (Sriramesh, 2012), engagement studies demonstrate a strong domination of US scholars and perspectives.

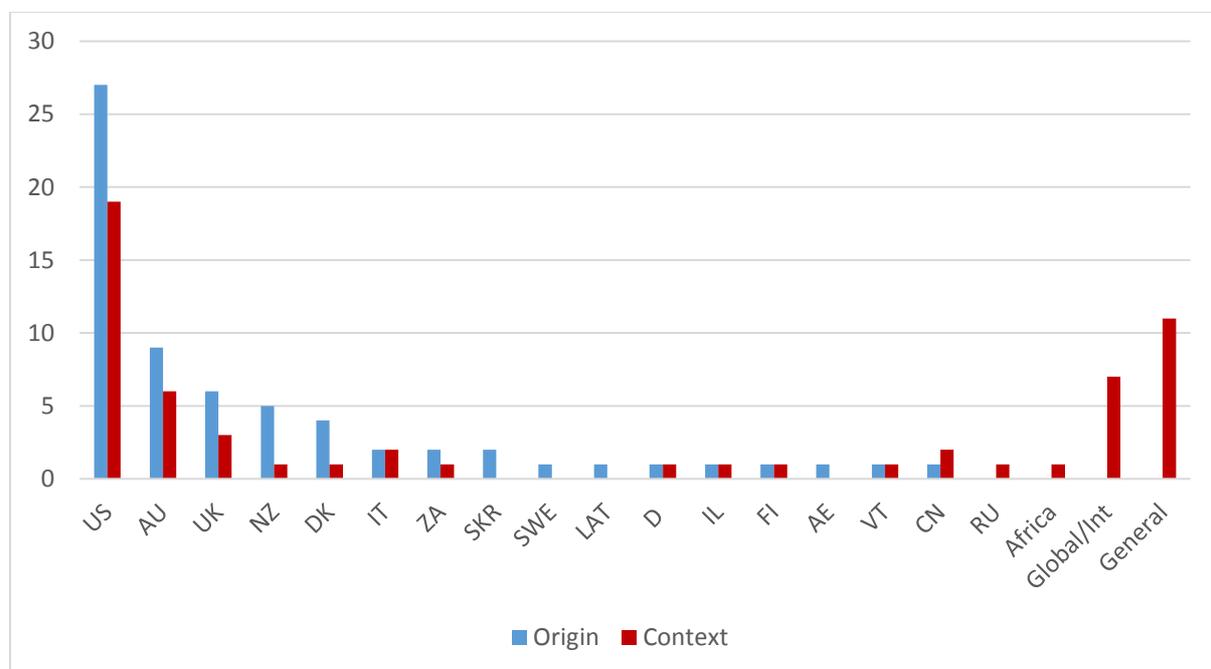
Almost half of the articles (45.8%, n = 27) are authored or co-authored by scholars affiliated with a US-based university. Australia comes second (15.3%, n = 9), followed by the UK (10.2%, n = 6), New Zealand (8.5%, n = 5) and Denmark (6.8%, n = 4). Authors based in Italy, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Latvia, Germany, Israel, Finland, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam and China had a marginal presence. It is worthwhile noting that only five articles (8.5%) were co-authored by scholars working in different countries, which indicates a relatively small scale of cross-national and cross-cultural collaboration in the area of public engagement.

Geographical contexts of the articles tend to be somewhat more diverse and internationally/globally oriented. Correspondingly with author's affiliation, almost one third of

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the studies was focused on the US context (32.2%, n = 19), followed by Australia (10.2%, n = 6) and UK (5.1%, n = 3). New Zealand, Denmark, Italy, South Africa, Germany, Israel, Finland, Vietnam, China, Russia and Sub-Saharan Africa received a rather scarce attention. A notable proportion of studies focused on global or international environments (11.9%, n = 7), while nearly one-fifth of the studies with general discussion on engagement did not have a specific geographical focus (Fig. 2).

**Figure 2:** Origin and context of engagement articles (countries are labelled with international abbreviations).



According to this data, public engagement tends to be with significant dominance studied in the US, followed by Asia-Pacific (in the vast majority Australia and New Zealand) and European countries (with concentration in Scandinavian countries and the UK). Only a handful of countries is represented or studied in the area of engagement with a complete absence of Canada, Central-Eastern Europe, Latin America and several other regions,

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indicating that the concept of engagement albeit a global phenomenon is short of global inclusiveness.

### 4.2. Themes and focus of engagement studies

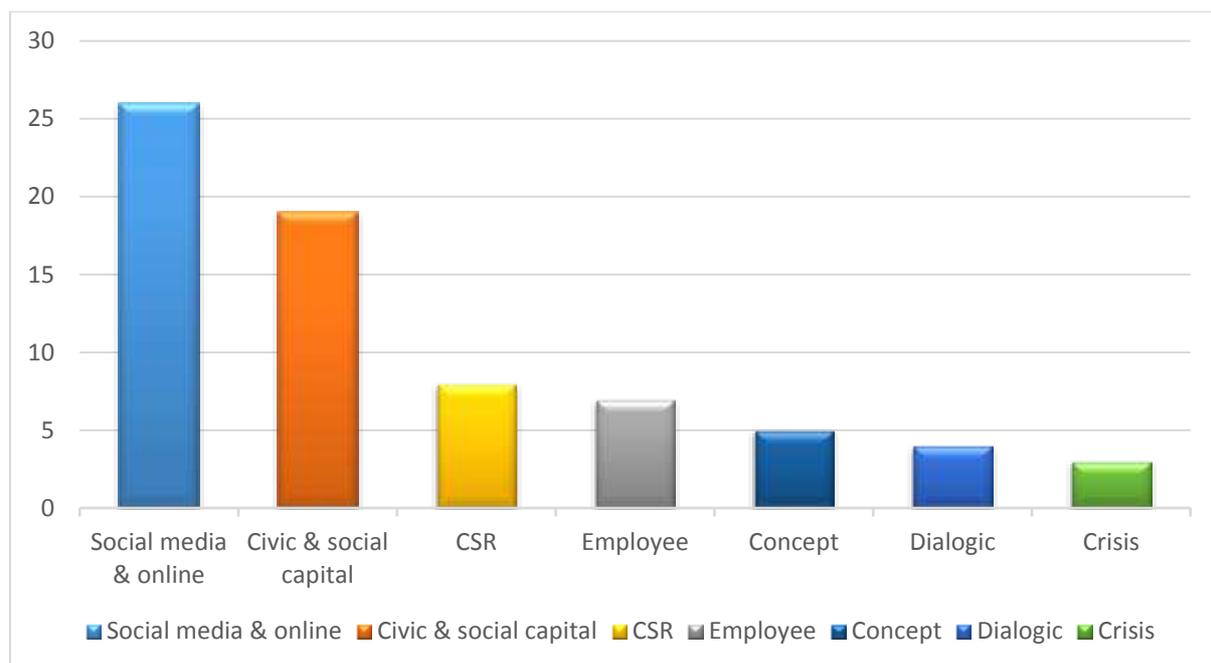
Following Taylor and Kent's (2014) classification, the articles were coded according to the following themes: (1) *social media and online engagement* (including websites and smartphones), (2) *employee engagement*, (3) *CSR and engagement*, (4) *civic engagement and social capital*, and (5) *dialogic engagement*. Two themes that emerged as distinctive in this study from those identified above were added to the list; (6) *crisis engagement*, concerned with public engagement in times of crisis, and (7) *concept of engagement*, focused on theoretical and conceptual discussions. While the majority of the articles discussed only one of the identified themes, nearly a quarter (22.0%, n = 13) combined two themes.

As expected and in line with the development of new media (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016; Taylor & Kent, 2014), *social media and online engagement* received by far the most attention with 44.1% (n = 26) of articles discussing this topic (see Fig. 3). *Civic engagement and social capital* follows with one third of the articles, while *CSR*, *employee engagement*, *concept of engagement*, *dialogic engagement* and *crisis engagement*, respectively, are present to a significantly lesser extent. The results do not particularly strongly align with Taylor and Kent's (2014) attempt to position engagement in the area of dialogue, but tend to suggest its understanding extends beyond dialogue into relationships, social capital, participatory interactions, meaning co-creation and decision-making. Additionally, infrequent presence of conceptual discussions surrounding the engagement does not live up to Hutchins and Tindall's (2016) expectation of scholars harnessing engagement's potential to fundamentally challenge traditional public relations theories and models.

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If we compare the themes with the geographical contexts, in which they are studied, *social media and online engagement* is by far most often studied in the US, while *CSR* is of a more concern in Asia-Pacific and European regions. *Civic engagement and social capital* appears as the theme most dispersedly studied in various different geographical contexts.

**Figure 3:** Themes in public engagement studies.



The scholarship demonstrates a strong organizational focus with over two-thirds of the articles adopting organization-focused approach (67.8%,  $n = 40$ ), while 22.0% ( $n = 13$ ) were public-centered and the rest focused on both or had no clear focus. When comparing focus with themes, the data indicates that *employee engagement* and *CSR* tend to be entirely organization-focused. Organizational focus dominates in all the identified themes, except for crisis engagement with two out of three articles focused on studying publics. This lack of focus on publics in engagement studies is a reason for concern. According to Devin and Lane (2014), scholars need to address engagement from the perspective of the publics if we are to understand dynamics, dedication, affective and motivational components of engagement as well as disengagement and their relations to trust, satisfaction, OPRs and behavioral intentions.

### 4.3. Theoretical approaches and perspectives on public engagement

Engagement studies are characterized by strong diversity of theories. By "theory" we refer to any theory that was explicitly labelled as such by the authors of the articles (identified with "theor\*" word search), whereas in-depth examination of these theories and determining if they indeed constitute a "theory" as a system of thought that describes, explains, and promotes understanding (Jelen, 2008) is beyond the scope of this study. 73 different theories were referred to in the articles with an average of 2.2 theories per article ( $\sigma = 2.01$ ). While most of the articles mentioned one theory (23.7%,  $n = 14$ ), mentioning two (15.3%,  $n = 9$ ) or three theories (18.6%,  $n = 11$ ) was also fairly common. One fifth of the articles (20.3%,  $n = 12$ ) mentioned four or more theories with maximum eight theories in one article. However, almost the same proportion of the articles (22.0%,  $n = 13$ ) had no mention of a theory.

The most commonly mentioned was *public relations theory* (see Table 2), followed by *relationship (management) theory*. The two theories were mentioned in half of the articles. Relatively often mentioned were also other public relations "classics", including *dialogue theory*, *stakeholder theory*, *Excellence theory*, *situational theory of publics* and *crisis communication theory*. 66 other theories, mentioned in three or fewer articles (with clear majority appearing in only one article), ranged from sociological, psychological, philosophical, cultural, political, media and communication to economic, organizational and management theories. This, on the one hand, indicates theoretic fragmentation in studying engagement and, on the other hand, interdisciplinary nature of the concept. Most of the studies, however, are still centered around normative, excellence-related public relations theories.

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**Table 2:** Theories mentioned in the articles on public engagement.

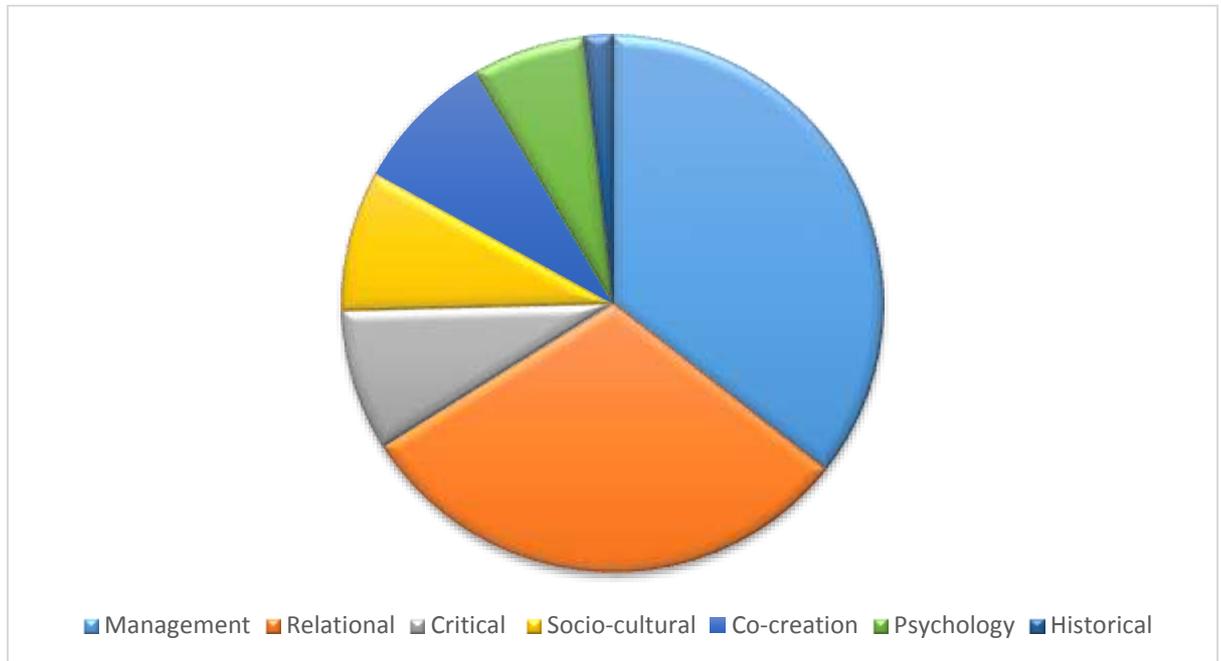
No.	Theories	Articles (n)
1	Public relations theory	18
2	OPR/relationship management theory/relationship theory	11
3	Dialogue/dialogic theory	6
4	Excellence theory; stakeholder management theory/stakeholder theory	5
4	Crisis communication theory/Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT); situational theory of publics	5
5	Democratic theory; grounded theory; social capital theory; social identity theory	3
6	Attribution theory; game theory; critical theory; normative theory	2
7	Agency theory; altruism theory; co-creation theory; commons theory; ommunication theory; community building theory; complexity theory; conformity theory; diffusion of innovation; direct theory; disruption theory; economic theory; engagement theory; emotion theory; ethics theory; ethnocentric theory; formal theory; functional emotion theory; functioning society theory; image restoration theory; inoculation theory; institutional theory; institutional governance theory; internal communication theory; interpersonal communication theory; intrinsic task motivation theory; management theory; media system dependency theory; medium theory; message effectiveness theory; network theory; norms theory; open system theory; organizational behavior theory; organizational communication theory; organizational identification theory; organizational theories; persuasion knowledge theory; pluralist theory; polycentric theory; postcolonial theory; principal/agent theory; reciprocity theory; representative theory of democracy; resource- based theory; rhetorical theory; role theory; signaling theory; Social Amplification of Risk Framework theory; social media engagement theory; social theory; spatial theory; substantive theory; symbolic interactionism; structuration theory; system theory; technical decision making theory; uses and gratification theory.	1

When looking at different perspectives, a clear majority of engagement tends to be studied from management/functional perspective (35.6%, n = 21) and relational perspective (30.5%, n = 18) (see Fig. 4). Far less often adopted were critical, co-creational, socio-cultural and psychological perspectives with historical perspective appearing in only one article. Notable is the absence of rhetorical and feminist perspective. This indicates that alternative perspectives in the area of public engagement do not yet receive the same attention as managerial and relational approaches (Edwards, 2016). The dominance tends to cut off opportunity for further growth and development of our understanding of the social, political

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and psychological aspects, roles, foundations and consequences of public engagement (Bardhan & Weaver, 2011; Curtin, 2012; Devin & Lane, 2014).

**Figure 4:** Perspectives in studies on public engagement.



When comparing the themes and perspectives, the data indicates that *social media and online engagement* theme has been mostly studied from management/functional and relational perspectives. The second most studied theme *civic engagement and social capital* demonstrates the highest diversity in perspectives as it has been studied from all, but psychological perspective, yet relational and management perspectives still prevail. *Employee engagement* has on the contrary been exclusively studied from the management/functional perspective, which together with its organizational focus confirms instrumental scholarly orientation (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

### 4.4. Methodological approaches and methods

Excluding discussion and introspective articles, just over a half of the empirical studies (23 out of 44<sup>1</sup>) used quantitative methodological approach, followed by 37.8% (n = 17) using qualitative methodology, while 11.1% (n = 5) combined qualitative and quantitative approaches. Mixed-methods approach, combining either qualitative and quantitative or different qualitative methods, was utilized in 18.2% (n = 8) of the articles.

Despite the prevalence of quantitative research, the most often used method was interview (34.1%, n = 15). What seems to contribute to its popularity is its suitability to be combined with other methods and to serve as a heuristic device to complement data collection (Pompper, 2006). In more than half of the cases, interviews were combined with other methods, including survey (n = 3), document analysis (n = 3), quantitative content analysis (n = 2) and observation (n = 1). Closely following the interview method was survey (31.8%, n = 14), followed by quantitative content analysis (25.0%, n = 11). Case study appears as the fourth most popular methodological approach, which in most cases employs a single method instead of triangulation (*cf.* Cutler, 2004). Other less often utilized methods were experiment, qualitative content analysis, observation, ethnography, historical narrative and social network analysis. It is noticeable that none of the articles used focus groups, otherwise identified as a popular method in public relations (Pasadeos et al., 2011; Pompper, 2006).

There is a clear dominance of interviews (within qualitative tradition) and surveys and content analysis (within quantitative tradition) in the studies of public engagement. Interviews and qualitative methods in general tend to appear in mixed-methods designs far more often than quantitative methods and also demonstrate greater diversity of methods (Table 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Non-empirical discussion and introspective articles were excluded from the analysis at this stage.

**Table 3:** Methods and methodological approaches in public engagement.

No	Method	Tradition	Articles (n)	Single	Combined
1	Interview	Qualitative	15	7	8
2	Survey	Quantitative	14	10	3
3	Content analysis (quant.)	Quantitative	11	9	2
4	Case study	Qualitative	6	4	2
5	Document analysis	Qualitative	5	1	4
6	Experiment	Quantitative	2	2	0
6	Content analysis (qual.)	Qualitative	2	2	0
6	Observation	Qualitative	2	0	2
7	Historical narrative	Qualitative	1	1	0
7	Ethnography	Qualitative	1	1	0
7	Social network analysis	Quantitative	1	1	0

The findings demonstrate a relatively narrow scope of mostly traditional methods in public engagement studies. Innovation and creativity in empirical inquiry well established in other disciplines (*cf.* Koc-Michalska et al., 2016) are lacking. Quantitative research dominates and while arguments are made that post-positivistic nature of inquiry is highly relevant if the field is to be taken seriously (Jelen, 2008; Pompper, 2006), others emphasize that in order to obtain comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the complexities of engagement, more ethnographic and action research approaches are needed (Curtin, 2012; L’Etang, 2011).

Comparing themes with methodological approach, quantitative tradition strongly dominates *social media and online engagement*, which can be partially linked to their US origins with a strong post-positivist orientation (Curtin, 2012). On the other hand, *CSR and civic engagement and social capital*, which are both characterized by greater geographical diversity, more often adopt qualitative approach. Interestingly, relational and psychological perspectives are strongly quantitatively dominated, while other perspectives lean towards qualitative methodology.

### 5. Conclusion

Despite its prominence in practice, engagement has received a scarce attention in public relations scholarship. There is a steady growth of interest in this area with increasing amount of studies and specialized conferences, including BledCom 2016 and its following 2017 special issue of *Public Relations Review*; making important contributions to this relatively unexplored field.

Besides the growing interest, there are very few reasons to be optimistic about the current state of engagement in public relations scholarship as this paper confirms its several critiques (e.g. Devin & Lane, 2014; Hutchins & Tindall, 2016; Kang, 2014; Taylor & Kent, 2014), but also identifies some encouraging signs of socio-cultural paradigmatic turn. Generally speaking, engagement studies are mostly concentrated in the area of social media and online engagement, studied from management/functional and relational perspectives with strong organizational focus and dominated by US scholarship. Despite notable presence of European and Asia-Pacific research, ethnocentricity and western orientation of engagement studies is indisputable. The highest diversity was reflected in civic engagement and social capital studies, which with their focus on community cohesion and promotion of democracy represent the second most frequently studied area. While a clear majority of the articles still adopted organization-centric approach, almost a third of them focused on publics or both, organizations and publics, contesting Devin and Lane's (2014) assumption that publics are completely absent from engagement research. Characterized by rich theoretical diversity, engagement studies still gravitate towards normative public relations theories related to management/functionalist paradigm with limited attention devoted to theoretical developments within socio-cultural turn and other disciplines. These traditional trends are also seen in methodology; while both epistemologies are accepted in engagement research, quantitative and

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not particularly innovative or creative methodological approaches prevail. Rather insular selection of research methods with a clear lead of interviews, surveys and content analyses, albeit contributing very valuable knowledge, is falling short in providing comprehensive, in-depth exploration and understanding of dynamics and complexities of engagement and disengagement. These trends advocate authoritarian perspective and one-way rather than interactional and participatory view on engagement, limiting the opportunity for public relations to fundamentally challenge traditional theoretical assumptions and models (Hutchins & Tindall, 2016) and/or contribute to building culture and cultivating engagement in a fully functioning society (Heath, 2006). With a few exceptions, engagement in public relations indeed tends to be treated as a phenomenon that organizations need to strategically “manage” and use to build effective and positive relationships with stakeholders for organizational benefits (Devin & Lane, 2014; Kang, 2014:).

The findings further indicate that the concept of engagement has not (yet) been subject to significant critical, reflexive and conceptual discussions in public relations. The engagement studies have also not (yet) embraced and/or enhanced a paradigmatic shift from organization-focused functionalism to socio-cultural and critical approaches and even less so showed an indication of a new paradigmatic approach as heralded by Johnston (2014). Instead, they tend to align themselves with post-positivist paradigm and “mainstream” public relations themes, theories, perspectives and methods, but with some encouraging orientations towards socio-critical direction. This imbalance between post-positivist and socio-cultural paradigmatic approaches, symptomatic of general trends in public relations discipline, is not necessarily intellectual, but also political, “as the academy is structured to reward certain choices and not others” (Curtin, 2012, p.43). While people are getting increasingly engaged in a disengaged world, public relations discipline seems disengaged from such developments in practice and theorizations.

### 5.1 Limitations and future directions

Conclusions drawn from this analysis need to be used with caution and cannot be generalized to entire public relations scholarship. Even though the four selected journals are considered as “barometers” of public relations field, examining public relations scholarly work on engagement published in other academic journals, monographs, edited book volumes and other scientific outlets as well as in other geographical contexts, particularly in Asia-Pacific region with high interest in engagement, and languages other than English might have yielded different results. By choosing US and European-based journals, this study, too, needs to admit its western bias. Additionally, results of the study are limited to details reported in original articles by their authors. An emphasis on observable and measurable elements of the articles, therefore, excludes in-depth investigations of their latent contextual, theoretical and paradigmatic underpinnings. Furthermore, the selection of the journals might have resulted in only limited inclusion of specialist areas, such as marketing, activism, sports and celebrity public relations, in which fan and participatory engagement represent important themes, often studied from socio-cultural perspective (*cf.* Hutchins & Tindall, 2016). Future introspective studies of engagement are therefore encouraged to examine other areas of scientific public relations avenues with different methodological approaches to offer additional insights, evaluations and future directions.

Despite its limitations, the study – together with other scholarly work in this area – offers some interesting reflections on trends and recommendations for future development of much needed engagement studies in public relations. Following an example of our neighboring disciplines (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016; Stirling, 2008; Welch, 2011), public relations scholarship needs to uncouple itself from traditional approaches and devote more attention to publics and stakeholders and their motivational, affective and behavioural predispositions to

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(dis)engage in interactive participatory deliberations, co-construction of meanings, socially situated understandings and collective decision-making within different cultures. Overcoming ethnocentricity and aiming for greater global and multi-cultural inclusiveness in engagement studies would have a strong potential in enriching our knowledge and understanding as well as diversifying thematic, theoretical and methodological horizons. This calls for scholarly move from dominant functional and instrumental research towards integration of socio-cultural, critical, historical and psychological perspectives. Engagement research also needs to become more adventurous, diverse, creative and innovative in its methodological approaches with a particularly promising potential of ethnography and action research, which would allow for deeper and more comprehensive exploration of engagement from the perspective of organizations and the publics (Curtin, 2012; L'Etang, 2011). In contemporary societies, the latter can no longer be conceptualized as mere recipients of organizational communication (as they often are in public relations), but rather as enabled individuals, who intensively communicate, interact with and influence organizations and each other. Addressing these challenges, engagement public relations scholarship has a potential to become more relevant to and connected with the developments in practice, academia and society.

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