

## **INFLUENCE OF CORPORATE CULTURE ON PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The paper examined the influence of corporate culture on public relations practice in Nigeria. Public relations practitioners might have seen corporate culture in relation to the practice of public relations as a natural phenomenon but scholars have hardly paid research attention to it as an important aspect of public relations practice. Scholars are curious to know what influence corporate culture might have on the communication process and relationship building between organizations and their stakeholders. Recent studies tend to link corporate culture with corporate change which is further seen as critical to the success of organisation. The theoretical framework for this study consists of organizational culture theory. It was established that perception of corporate culture has a direct bearing with corporate relationship.*

**KEYWORDS:** Public relations, corporate culture, corporate communication, publics, stakeholders

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The concepts of corporate culture and relationship management are not new in the public relations literature. Numerous studies have examined corporate culture and how it affects public relations practice. J. Grunig, L. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) posit that public relations departments can be influential in changing the larger culture of an organization. More recently, scholars have argued that the main function of public relations practice is relationship management (Bruning, 2002). Research in this area determined that organization-public relationships, when managed effectively, does affect stakeholders' attitudes, evaluations, and behaviors (Bruning, 2002). Despite the abundant literature advocating the importance of both organizational culture to public relations, there has been minimal research devoted to how these two concepts are related. Specifically how corporate culture and its effect relate to the public relations practice of any organisation. The concept of culture, also referred to as societal culture, emerged from the field of anthropology. However, a commonly agreed-upon definition has not been produced, and many articulations and descriptions of culture exist. Culture has been defined as shared meanings or symbols. Hofstede (2001) viewed values, which consists of symbols, heroes, and rituals, as the part of culture that cannot be seen. Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another

L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) collaborated to find similarities among all the definitions they studied and came up with one, which provides the conceptual definition of culture used in this study. Specifically, “culture is the sum total of shared values, symbols, meanings, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that organize and integrate a group of people who work together” (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002) Essentially, L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) determined that corporate culture is composed of a set of assumptions that provide an organizational worldview and what is produced from it. Values, stories, myths, artifacts, and rituals may be the product of the worldview. Organizational behavior values are the framework that contributes to culture. People learn culture, which functions within a group, and culture is inseparably tied to communication. A person’s culture shapes a host of business communication factor.

Relationships are a connection, association, or involvement, and they represent the exchange or transfer of information, energy, or resource. Therefore, a relationship can be formed through social and cultural norms—the sum total of shared values, symbols, meanings, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that organize and integrate a group of people. Despite the shared conceptual foundation of corporate culture and relationship management, these aspects of public relations scholarship and practice have not been strongly linked to their contributions to organizational effectiveness. According to Sriramesh (2007) culture is at the bedrock to any relationship building process, it is yet to be incorporated into the discussion directed at relationship building. This study is significant because of its ability to contribute to public relations theory and practice by building on previous public relations studies on corporate culture and relationship management to ascertain the contextual relevance of public relations theory. The hope is that the concept of culture will continue to be integrated into the discussion of relationship building. From an applied perspective, the research presented here can provide public relations departments with effective tools to bring changes within organizations to build positive relationships. So, the central objective of this study is to determine the influence of corporate culture on public relations practices in an organisation.

This study builds on previous studies that have attempted to understand and explain effective public relations practice. J. Grunig, L. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) introduced two distinct types of culture in the Excellence Study: authoritarian and participative cultures. This study uses the measures of authoritarian and participative cultures to determine how they relate to the dimensions of organization-public relationships. We will also review literatures linking culture and organizations and attempt to explain the concept of corporate culture, the importance of corporate culture, corporate culture and public relations, and measurements of organizational.

### **Corporate Culture**

A country transmits her culture to an organization through its employees. Secondly, corporate culture (internal culture) exists within a societal culture. This study determined that societal culture is equally important as corporate culture because it influences the human resources of the organisation as well as its corporate culture (Sriramesh, J. Grunig, & Buffington, 1992) . Whereas societal culture is external to the organization, corporate culture deals with the internal patterns, behaviors, values, beliefs, etc., of an organization. Coinciding with the definition of

culture, scholars have provided a plethora of definitions for corporate culture. Culture can be seen as “the glue that hold excellent organizations together and keep mediocre organizations mediocre” (Sriramesh, J , et all, 1992). Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Buffington (1992) referred to corporate culture as the rules and roles employees must learn in order to be accepted within the organization. Hatch (2006) provides a list of the most widely used definitions of corporate culture within her text. Her analysis found that most of the definitions included the concepts of shared meanings, beliefs, assumptions, understandings, norms, values, and knowledge, which are common among groups of people. Hatch points out that, among all the definitions, the common themes illustrate corporate and subcultural levels of analysis. Hatch contends that culture represents a definite way of life among people or community, and organizations are communities that sometimes grow to be complex enough to sustain smaller communities or subcultures. Hatch defines subculture as a group of members within an organization that identify themselves separately and make decisions based on their exceptional communal understanding. She explains that typically the dominant subculture in the organization is set apart by senior executives and this explains why organizational culture is often called corporate culture. In this paper, corporate culture is therefore used to infer organization culture. The definitions included in this review provide a conceptual understanding of corporate culture. Sriamesh, J. Grunig and Dozier (1996) maintain that it is imperative to unify the concept and arrive at comprehensive measures to identify it in organizations.

### **Utilizing corporate culture**

A conceptual understanding of corporate culture provides an understanding of why organizational culture is important. In recent years, business scholars have studied corporate culture and found that its importance is tied to the notion of corporate change. Ke and Wei (2008) discover that corporate culture was critical to the success of corporate change-oriented projects. Cameron and Quinn (2006) argue that due to the rapid growth and change of external environments change in organizations is unavoidable. This is attributed to the fact that most managers are ultimately concern with the effectiveness of their organisations (Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Dozier 1996). Their research revealed that without change in organizational culture organizations cannot expect to pursue improvement in organizational performance. Many organizations have the tools and techniques needed to implement change, but most often organizational change fails because the basic culture of the organization is not taken into consideration. Organizations fail to study and change values, managerial styles, ways of thinking, and approaches to problem solving (Cameron & Quinn, 2006). Sun (2008) concludes that corporate culture should not be ignored because the process of organizational development will always depend on culture as a competitive advantage. He further suggests that a corporate culture where beliefs and values are widely shared can also have advantages with cooperation, control, communication, and commitment. At the core of the literature on the importance of organizational culture is the thought that organizational culture can be managed. Organizational effectiveness and profitability can be managed to accomplish organizational goals set by the organization. Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Dozier (1996) found that organizational culture could be measured and managed.

### **Corporate Culture and Public Relations**

Before establishing a between corporate culture and public relations, it is important to relate corporate culture with communications. The connection between organizational culture and

communications can be found in the conceptual meaning of communication. Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Dozier (1996) contend that understanding the communication process and linking it to organizational culture is important to public relations scholars. They viewed public relations as a communication activity and saw public relations as both a product of culture and instrument of culture. The authors defined public relations as the management of communication between an organization and its internal and external publics. Consequently, they conducted a quantitative study to determine whether public relations affects organizational culture and sought to answer if organizational culture can be measured and changed. They believe that public relations is partly the portion of organizational communication that professional communicators oversee. Cameron and McCollum (1993) used in-depth interviews and surveys to study the connection between the success of internal communications and shared beliefs among members of the dominant coalition and employees. In turn, they evaluated the link between corporate culture and public relations. The authors proposed that communication between management and employees has the potential to produce and accelerate consensus between employees and management at the level of constructs, ideals, and beliefs. The findings extended the idea that public relations practitioners should promote two-way communication between members of the dominant coalition and members of the organization. Consequently, the organization will have a stronger corporate culture (Sriramesh, 2007).

Sriramesh (2007) opines that except for the studies previously discussed, it would be difficult to find published information of empirical research standing that specifically connects corporate culture with public relations. However, Reber and Cameron (2003) tried to establish a linkage between corporate culture and public relations but rather than measuring corporate culture precisely, they discuss corporate culture as a factor that decisively affects the outcome of public relations. This study aligns itself with Sriramesh, J. Grunig and Dozier (1996) who also discovered that public relations practitioners have the greatest impact on the decisions made about public relations when one or more of them are included in the organization's dominant coalition. If a public relations practitioner is not part of the dominant coalition, which is often the case, public relations practitioners function more in the implementation of public relations oriented decisions instead of participating in the process of their formulation.

Corporate culture also has indirect effects on public relations. Corporate culture is influenced by the power holders in the dominant coalition, and it affects which key managers gain enough power to be in the dominant coalition. The preceding review of the literature suggests that public relations can affect corporate culture, and corporate culture affects public relations. Public relations practitioners must study and understand corporate culture in order to make decisions about organizational goals that can improve on the relationships with key publics.

### **Dimensions of corporate culture**

The dimensions of organizational culture described in this section derive from the research conducted by Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Dozier (1996) for the Excellence Study. Grunig (1992b) identified one of the characteristics of the Excellence Study as strong, participative cultures. The characteristic suggests that excellent organizations share a sense of mission. They are integrated by strong culture that values human resources, organic structures, innovation, and symmetrical

communication. The Excellence Study identified two dimensions of culture: participative culture and authoritarian culture (J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). This section analyzes the literature on participative and authoritarian culture. Specifically, how these dimensions of culture can be used as measures of organizational culture as they relate to this study. Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Dozier (1996) analyzed the relation between corporate culture and the organizations public relations activities using factor analysis, which narrowed down the large number of items they developed into two factors. The factors seemed to be consistent with the concepts of authoritarian and participative cultures.

Grunig, L., Grunig, J. and Dozier (2002) describe organizations with authoritarian cultures as those that centralized decision making in which only members of the dominant coalition make important decisions. They believe that different departments pursue their separate agendas that may conflict with each other. Members of the organization believe they have little power to create change. Employees also feel that senior management only perceives them as a function of the organization and fear top management. The authors express authoritarian cultures as closed and resistant to ideas from outside organizations. Participative cultures emphasize teamwork as a common value among employees (Grunig,L., Grunig,J. & Dozier, 2002). Departments within the organization collaborate for a shared mission. Grunig,L., Grunig, J. and Dozier (2002) indicated that “departmental agendas match the overall goals and objectives of the organization. Members of the organization say they would manage the organization the same way as members of the executive team. Employees believe that the dominant coalition values them as people and not just functions of the organization. Participative organizations are open to ideas from outside the organization as well as the internal environment. Sriramesh, Grunig, J. and Dozier (1996) derived two different types of organizational culture from different sources, which included the following characteristics from Ouchi’s (1981) study of a Japanese company in the United States, where Theory J (Japanese style) compared with Theory A (U.S. style) organizations:

- Collective versus individual responsibility
- Collective versus individual decision making
- Collective versus individual values
- Holistic concern versus lack of such concern for employees
- Long-term versus short-term employment
- Slow versus fast evaluation and promotion
- Non-specialized versus specialized career paths

Sriramesh, J. Grunig, and Dozier (1996) used several characteristics from their previous research on the relations between organizational ideology and presuppositions and models of public relations and developed the following variables:

**Importance of innovation, tradition, and efficiency as organizational values**

- Participative versus authoritarian management style
- Liberal versus conservative values
- Cooperation versus domination in relationships with publics
- System open versus closed to its environment

To measure perceptions of organizational culture this study focuses on these variables. Sriramesh, Grunig, J. and Dozier (1996) also included the following from the literature of corporate culture as part of their study. They are: shared mission, rewards for performance rather than personal connections, social atmosphere among employees and managers off the job, integration versus individualism, emphasis on time, style of decision making, and consensual process (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002}

Grunig, L., Grunig, J. and Dozier (2002) reason that excellent public relations programmes would have characteristics of a participative culture. From the beginning of their study, they contend that organizations can have both characteristics of a participative and authoritarian culture. In their conclusion, they linked public relations with organizational culture and suggested that for excellent public relations there need not be a presence of a participative culture. The results pertaining to authoritarian culture did not relate negatively to factors from the Excellence Study. They observe that a participative culture offers a more supportive, nurturing environment for excellent public relations than an authoritarian culture. A conceptual understanding of authoritarian and participative cultures is a starting point for studying how corporate culture might link organization-public relationships.

### **Organization-Public Relationships**

Sriramesh (2007) asserts that culture is an indispensable aspect of the relationship building process. Yet, only a few studies have attempted to integrate culture with research in relationship management. Unlike organizational culture, relationship management scholars have emerged themselves into the study “of public relations as the management of relationships between an organization and its key publics” (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). Ledingham (2001) derived at “four pivotal developments, which spurred emergence of the relational perspective as a framework for public relations study, teaching and practice.

The first development as Ledingham (2001) proposed was the recognition of the central role of relationships in public relations. Second, Ledingham offered the reconceptualizing of public relations as a management function. The idea of managing organization-public relationships introduced the management process to public relations practice (Ledingham, 2003). Third, scholars began to present the identification of components and types of organization-public relationships, their linkage to public attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and behavior, and relationship measurement strategies. The last and fourth development established organization-public relationships models, which included antecedents, properties, consequences, and maintenance as well as monitoring strategies (Ledingham, 2003). Emergence into relationship management scholarship also advanced a 10-phase development model and a five-step process model. These vital developments contributed to the fundamentals of the relational perspective, which is encapsulated in Center and Jackson’s (1995) observation that “the term for desired outcomes of public relations practice is public relations”. Furthermore, “an organization with effective public relations will attain positive public relationships”

Like organizational culture, organization-public relationship is about organizational effectiveness. Just as the Excellence Study identified that effective public relations recognizes strong,

participative culture, it also argued that public relations contributes to the effectiveness of an organization when it identifies strategic publics and uses symmetrical communication to “develop and maintain quality long-term relationships” ( Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). Hon and Grunig (1999) asserted that public relations contributed to organizational effectiveness when communication programmes identify key publics and works to establish and maintain relationships over a long period of time. Effectiveness is the extent to which organizations can meet their goals. Organizations are more effective when they build quality relationships that allow for more independence, which result in the realization of the organizations mission (Grunig, Grunig & Ehling, 1992). Grunig (1992) defined the major purpose of public relations as “building relationships with publics that constrain or enhance the ability of the organization to meet its mission”. In order to continue the discussion, organization-public relations needs to be defined. The pursuit to define organization-public relationships began with Broom, Casey, and Ritchey’s (1997) call for a definition. Ledingham and Bruning (1998: 55-66.) retort with the first organization-public relationships definition as “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the action of either can impact the economical, social, cultural or political well being of the other”. Their definition links relationships with impact. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) defined organization-public relationships using a transactional approach. They posit that organization-public relationships are characterized by the type of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between organization and its publics. Hung (2007) defined organization-public relationship from the lens of system theory, where there is a mutual affect between organizations and their publics. Hung (2005) states that organization-public relationships appear when organizations and their publics become reliant on each other, which moves the organization to action.

### **Theoretical Standpoint**

The intellectual construct for the paper is the relational management theory. A common theme that emerges from the definitions of organization-public relationships is the connection between the organization and its strategic publics. Ledingham (2003) articulates and explicates that the theory of relationship management involves focusing organization-public relationships towards common interests and shared goals, which over time, results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and their relevant publics. The relationship paradigm offers framework to examine the connection between public relations objectives and organizational goals, for constructing platforms of strategic planning and tactical implementation, and evaluating programmes in a way that members of the dominant coalition understand and appreciate (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). This section reviews the literature on the dominant paradigm for studying organization-public relationships and its application.

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) developed a theoretical framework for defining organization-public relations. The notion for this study was based on the authors’ pioneering model that emerged from systems theory, which form definitions of systems on the idea of interdependence, or relatedness, of elements. They maintain that the concept of systems theory suggests a concept of relationships. Relationships in this context represent the exchange or transfer of information, energy, or resources. Therefore, attributes of those exchanges or transfers represent and define the

relationship. At the level of organization-public systems, the attributes of linkages among the participants describe the relationships within the system as well as the structure of the system. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey's (1997) model incorporated antecedents, subsequent states, and consequences of organization-public relationships. Antecedents included perceptions, motives, needs, behaviors and as contingencies or causes in the formation of relationships. They further argue that antecedents are the origin of change due to stressors on the system stemming from the environment. Furthermore, consequences of organization-public relationships were the outputs that have the capacity of shaping the environment and of achieving, maintaining or changing goal of the organization both internally and externally. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (2000) looked more closely at the model, suggesting transactions are part of the process if fulfilling needs can be used to describe, categorize, and evaluate the quality of relationships (Ledingham, 2003) .

They added three additional dimensions of relationships which were underlined by formalization, standardization, and complexity. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey also suggested the intensity and reciprocity of two fundamental relationship processes in the information flow and resource flow. The authors conclude that relationships are subject to different interpretations, and that the importance of determining the perceptions of relationship of all publics evolved separately from their behaviour in the relationship (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000).

J. Grunig and Huang (2000) reconceptualized the model and described antecedents as characteristics of key publics, maintenance strategies as relationship states, and outcomes of those strategies as outcomes. They suggested using environmental scanning to monitor antecedents, continual observations by management and publics for the relationship state, and coorientational measurement for consequences. Furthermore, J. Grunig and Huang organized antecedents of relationships and maintenance strategies into a process model of relationships and added the relationship outcomes identified by Huang (1997). Huang suggested trust, control mutuality, relational commitment, and relational satisfaction as vital indicators, which represent the quality of organization-public relationships.

Broom, Casey, and Ritchey's (2000) model of organization-public relationships classified cultural norms as a source of change, which results in forming and maintaining a relationship. That includes shared values, symbols, meanings, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations of a group. The review on the literature on Broom, Casey, and Ritchey's model illustrates how organizational culture can affect organization-public relationships. The next section discusses the two types of relationships and expands on Huang's (1997) relationship outcomes.

### **Types of Relationships**

Clark and Mills (1993) identified two types of interpersonal relationships that explicate the desired nature of the relationship between an organization and the publics. Hon and J. Grunig (1999) established two primary types of relationships that may exist between an organization and its publics as exchange relationship and communal relationship.



### **Exchange relationships.**

In an exchange relationship, one party gives benefits to the other only either because the other has provided benefits before or would likely do so in the nearest future (L. Grunig, J Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). Exchange relationships occur when parties give the same value of benefits they expect to receive. Grunig, L. Grunig, J. and Dozier argue that exchange relationship reflects the nature of marketing relationships, but it often is not adequate for a relationship with the publics which involves a wider dimension of the society. Organizations owe the society a moral obligation to give back to the community and its stakeholders, and often receive little or nothing in return (Hon & Grunig, 1999; L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

### **Communal relationships**

In a communal relationship, the parties involved provide benefits to the other mainly because they are concerned with the welfare of the other even when they get nothing in return (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999). L. Grunig, J. Grunig, and Dozier (2002) suggested that the role of public relations is to work with members of the dominant coalition to help them understand the importance of building communal relationships with publics such as employees, the host community, and the media. The researchers contended that public relations practitioners add value to the organization when they establish communal relationships. When organizations are faced with the need to be socially responsible and to add value to society as well as to client organizations they have no choice but to embrace communal relationships (L. Grunig, J. Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

Hon and J. Grunig (1999) explained that exchange relationships are not good for an organization. They recommend that public relations professionals should not seek to develop exchange relationships. Clark and Mills (1993) state that most relationships begin as exchange relationships and develop into communal relationships as they are established. Hon and J. Grunig further explicate that exchanges can begin to build trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction. In return, public relations professionals can establish long-term communal relationships where the level of these four indicators could become even higher and remain stable over time (Hon & J. Grunig, 1999). The process can also be reversed, and there are times when a communal relationship needs to be established for an exchange to occur. In perspective, communal relationships contribute to organization effectiveness when public relations professionals become experts in building this relationship type, a practice that sets public relations apart from other functions of organization.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study attempts to measure perceptions of organizational culture and organization-public relationships with key external publics. In addition, this study seeks to extend public relations theory by examining how measures of authoritarian and participative culture relate to the dimensions of organization-public relationships, including variables of trust, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction. Specifically, it asks how perceptions of organizational culture are related to perceptions of organization-public relationships.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Corporate culture is an under studied area of discourse. The following recommendations will help in understanding and developing viable public relations practice based on the findings from this study.

First, organisations that desire increased commitment from their publics should begin by initiating change in their corporate culture and improve the quality of their internal and external relationship.

Second, organisations should adopt the communal type of relationship as this will foster better relationships between the organisation and its publics.

Third, more study on the influence of corporate culture on the practice of public relations should be carried out.

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