

The Role of Public Relations in Shaping Public Opinion and Organizational Legitimacy

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ABSTRACT

Purpose:

Public relations (PR) have increasingly assumed a strategic role in shaping public opinion and sustaining organizational legitimacy in contemporary communication. Although a substantial body of research has examined public relations practices, media relations, and legitimacy, existing studies remain conceptually fragmented and dispersed across disciplines. This review synthesizes scholarly literature on the role of public relations in influencing public opinion and building organizational legitimacy, addressing the lack of integrative review-based analyses in this area. This study aims to identify dominant themes, theoretical approaches, and research gaps to advance the understanding of public relations as a legitimacy-oriented organizational function. This study employs an organized literature review methodology using peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and conference proceedings in the domains of public relations, communication, media studies, and organizational theory. Academic databases and manual reference searches were used to identify pertinent materials. To find conceptual patterns and theoretical contributions, studies were thematically analysed after being chosen based on their applicability to public relations, public opinion, and organizational legitimacy. The assessment revealed that public relations significantly influence public opinion through stakeholder involvement, agenda-setting, media relations, and framing. The results also show that strategic communication techniques that match organizational activities with social norms and expectations actively create and preserve the legitimacy of the organization. However, discrepancies in the conceptualization and measurement of legitimacy and public opinion were found, underscoring the fragmentation of theory and methodology in this literature. The results offer insightful information for public relations professionals and organizational leaders looking to improve legitimacy, credibility, and trust. Organizations can create moral, open, and successful communication strategies by understanding how public relations shape public perception. Policymakers and communication experts working in high-scrutiny settings can also benefit from the review's recommendations. By providing a thorough synthesis of public relations studies connecting public opinion and organizational legitimacy, this review adds to the existing body of literature. This study lays the groundwork for future theoretical and empirical research in strategic public relations by identifying underserved areas and clarifying important ideas through the integration of perspectives from organizational theory and communication studies.

Keywords: Public Relations; Public Opinion; Organizational Legitimacy; Strategic Communication; Media Relations; Stakeholder Engagement; Corporate Reputation

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1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) have developed from a technical communication function into a strategic management activity that is essential to organizational legitimacy and governance (Davis, 2000; Edwards, 2012; Spicer, 2013). PR departments function as boundary-spanning units in modern businesses, mediating relationships between organizations and their internal and external surroundings, such as the public, stakeholders, the media, and politicians (Kelleher, 2001; Spicer, 2013). This shift reflects broader organizational context changes marked by increased media scrutiny, digital communication, and greater public demands for ethics, accountability, and transparency (Macnamara, 2012; Edwards, 2012). Consequently, PR is increasingly recognized as a crucial tool for managing visibility, creating meaning, and negotiating social standing (Edwards, 2012).

Public opinion is crucial in determining organizational outcomes because it affects social acceptance, reputation, and trust (McCombs, 2017; Mutz & Young, 2011). Public opinion is conceptualized by communication and sociological studies as a socially produced phenomenon influenced by institutional narratives, media discourse, and strategic communication (McCombs, 2017; Noyon et al., 2020). Organizations seeking long-term stability, stakeholder support, and resource access must create a positive public impression (Yoon, 2005; Wilson & Knighton, 2021). Organizational legitimacy, which is the broad view that an organization's actions are in line with existing societal norms, beliefs, and expectations, is closely associated with public opinion (Hannigan & Kueneman, 1977; Merkelsen, 2011). In situations of uncertainty and public scrutiny, legitimacy serves as a form of social acceptability that allows institutions to function efficiently (Wilson & Knighton, 2021; Wæraas & Maor, 2014).

Through strategic communication techniques, such as media relations, problem framing, crisis management, and stakeholder engagement, public relations departments play a crucial role in influencing public opinion and establishing organizational legitimacy (Davis, 2000, 2008; Rice & Bartlett, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2016). PR specialists also serve as cultural mediators, interpreting public expectations of business leaders and converting organizational objectives into socially acceptable narratives (Edwards, 2012; Schoenberger-Orgad, 2007, 2009). Because of this dual role, PR is positioned as an important player in processes that establish legitimacy, particularly in fields such as corporate diplomacy, public-private partnerships, and global governance (Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021; Marschlich, 2022).

Despite growing scholarly interest in public relations, public opinion, and legitimacy, current research is still dispersed among disciplines and frequently examines these ideas separately (Merkelsen, 2011; Neuner, 2020). Studies often ignore the strategic significance of PR departments in favor of concentrating on media processes and institutional legitimacy (Davis, 2000; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023). This disarray emphasizes the necessity of a thorough synthesis that combines organizational theory, legitimacy research, and communication studies (Patel et al., 2005; Spicer, 2013).

Therefore, this study aims to methodically examine how public relations influence public perception and support organizational legitimacy. This study aims to create an integrated conceptual framework and provide useful insights for PR practitioners working in increasingly complex communication environments by synthesizing traditional and modern literature on media relations, stakeholder engagement, framing, corporate diplomacy, and ethical communication in the public and private sectors.

2. Methods and Materials

To investigate how public relations influences public opinion and organizational legitimacy, this study used an organized literature review methodology. Two complementary approaches were used to find pertinent academic literature published up to June 2025 to guarantee thorough coverage.

Major academic databases and scholarly search engines, such as Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis, Emerald, and Routledge, were first thoroughly searched. Peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, conference proceedings, and empirical and theoretical studies that adhered to accepted academic standards, including precisely defined research questions, techniques, and conclusions, were incorporated into the review.

The search method was guided by a predetermined list of terms, including public relations, public opinion, organizational legitimacy, strategic communication, media relations, and stakeholder engagement. Quotation marks and Boolean operators were used to improve the results and guarantee accuracy. To cover both fundamental theories and recent advancements in public relations and legitimacy studies, the review included material published between 1977 and 2024.

Second, backward and forward citation tracking was used to find important and often-cited publications in the field. This strategy strengthened the review's theoretical foundation by ensuring that important works on public opinion formation, media-PR connections, strategic communication, and legitimacy theory were included.

Strict exclusion criteria were used to preserve quality and focus. Studies that addressed legitimacy or public opinion without a clear connection to PR tactics and those that did not prioritize public relations or strategic communication were omitted. Opinion pieces, non-English periodicals, and non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded. When combined, these selection and screening processes guarantee conceptual consistency, methodological rigor, and applicability to the study's goals.

3. Results

This section presents the key findings of the study regarding the role of public relations in shaping public opinion and fostering organizational legitimacy. Drawing on theoretical analysis and a systematic review of relevant literature, the results are organized thematically to reflect the core dimensions of public relations practice and its societal impact. The findings highlight how conceptual foundations of public relations intersect with the dynamics of public opinion formation and the theoretical underpinnings of organizational legitimacy. Furthermore, the results illustrate the strategic functions of public relations in influencing perceptions, building trust, and maintaining legitimacy through communication practices, while also identifying prevailing challenges and ethical concerns that shape contemporary public relations activities.

3.1. Conceptual Foundations of Public Relations

Public relations have evolved from a technical endeavour focused on media management and publicity to a strategic management function integrated into corporate governance (Davis, 2000; Edwards, 2012; Spicer, 2013). Early ideas placed a strong emphasis on one-way communication to influence an organization's reputation and obtain positive media attention, portraying the public as passive information consumers (Davis, 2000). However, modern viewpoints consider public relations as a socially grounded communication process focused on meaning development, relationship building, and dialogue (Edwards, 2012; Macnamara, 2012). Thus, PR helps negotiate social values and organizational legitimacy, in addition to persuasion (Merkelsen, 2011; Motion, 2005).

The public relations department functions as a cross-cutting element in contemporary organizations, handling communication with the media, stakeholders, regulators, and civil society (Kelleher, 2001; Verčič & Colić, 2016). Its duties include environmental scanning, legitimacy management, strategic advice, and operational communication (Spicer, 2013). According to research, companies can better manage legitimacy risks and predict changes in public expectations when PR is incorporated into senior management decision-making (Kim & Kim, 2016; Spicer, 2013). However, PR's ability to establish credibility and maintain legitimacy is greatly diminished when it is marginalized or limited to technical duties (Merkelsen, 2011; Motion, 2005).

3.2. Public Opinion and Its Dynamics

Public opinion refers to the collective assessments, opinions, and attitudes that social groups have toward institutions, organizations, and public issues (Mutz & Young, 2011; McCombs, 2017). Public opinion is socially created through interaction, cultural norms, and shared meaning-making processes, rather than being a straightforward compilation of individual preferences (Mutz & Young, 2011; Noyon et al., 2020). Consequently, it serves as a potent social force that either permits or restricts organizational behaviour by establishing what is appropriate, desirable, and lawful in a particular social setting (Hannigan & Kueneman, 1977; Neuner, 2020).

From a communication standpoint, agenda-setting, framing, and media visibility have a significant impact on public opinion (McCombs, 2017; Rice & Bartlett, 2006). While framing influences the understanding of accountability, morality, and consequences, media attention determines which topics become prominent (McCombs, 2017). Organizational communication, especially public relations, plays an indirect but significant role by providing narratives and information that spread across media systems (Davis, 2000, 2008). Social media and interpersonal networks further enhance opinion formation in digital and networked contexts by facilitating public engagement and expediting the flow of information (Etter et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 1997). Therefore, trust in information sources is crucial because scepticism and contestation are increased by competing narratives and deteriorating institutional legitimacy (Chung & Nah, 2013; Wilson & Knighton, 2021).

3.3. Organizational Legitimacy: Concepts and Theoretical Perspectives

Organizational legitimacy refers to the broad conviction that an organization's behaviours, structures, and results conform to accepted social norms, beliefs, and expectations (Hannigan & Kueneman, 1977; Merkelsen, 2011). Legitimacy is a socially manufactured and constantly negotiated resource, rather than an innate organizational characteristic (Hannigan & Kueneman, 1977; Neuner, 2020). While legitimacy deficiencies can result in reputational harm, public opposition, and heightened scrutiny, legitimacy plays a crucial role in garnering stakeholder support, favourable media coverage, and resilience during challenging times (Wilson & Knighton, 2021; Wæraas & Maor, 2014).

Legitimacy theory distinguishes three types of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral, and cognitive (Patel et al., 2005; Merkelsen, 2011). Stakeholder assessments of usefulness, responsiveness, and performance are the foundation of pragmatic legitimacy (Patel et al., 2005). While cognitive legitimacy emerges when organizations are seen as inherent or taken-for-granted components of the social system, moral legitimacy reflects opinions about moral behaviour and social responsibility (Hannigan & Kueneman, 1977; Merkelsen, 2011). By controlling the narratives, symbols, and connections that influence how firms are assessed, public relations contribute to all three types (Merkelsen, 2011; Schoenberger-Orgad, 2007). PR departments assist firms in justifying their activities, aligning with societal ideals, and integrating themselves into established institutional frameworks through strategic communication (Edwards, 2012; Spicer, 2013).

3.4. Role of Public Relations in Shaping Public Opinion

Public relations impact public opinion by influencing information flows, interpretive frameworks, and communication interactions between corporations and their publics (Davis, 2000, 2008; McCombs, 2017). PR departments influence issue salience through media relations by offering information subsidies that influence public attention and the news agenda (Davis, 2000; McCombs, 2017). Access to media venues is made easier by long-term connections with journalists; however, these relationships require constant compromises regarding legitimacy and framing (Shin & Cameron, 2005; Verčič & Colić, 2016).

Public relations affect how topics are perceived through framing, storytelling, and agenda-setting (Rice & Bartlett, 2006; McCombs, 2017). PR experts influence moral judgments and causal explanations by highlighting and downplaying certain aspects of organizational behaviour (Rice & Bartlett, 2006; Chermak & Weiss, 2005). By connecting an organization's actions to larger cultural norms and societal meanings, narrative creation helps the public understand complicated or contentious situations (Edwards, 2012; Schoenberger-Orgad, 2007, 2009). By acknowledging the public as active participants in meaning-making rather than passive receivers of communication, public engagement and discussion further increase this influence (Macnamara, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2016). Dialogic communication increases credibility and trust, which raises the possibility of a positive public perception (Wilson & Knighton, 2021; Merkelsen, 2011).

Crisis situations are times when the public's attention and opinions are volatile (Rice & Bartlett, 2006). Public relations are essential in these situations for information management, accountability, and resolving public issues (Merkelsen, 2011; Motion, 2005). While poor communication can exacerbate public mistrust and loss of legitimacy, ethical, open, and prompt crisis communication can reduce unfavourable opinions and safeguard an organization's reputation (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Wilson & Knighton, 2021).

3.5. Public Relations and Organizational Legitimacy

By coordinating communication with social conventions, values, and stakeholder expectations, public relations play a crucial role in establishing and preserving corporate legitimacy (Merkelsen, 2011; Motion, 2005). Ethical and transparent communication conveys responsibility and sincerity, which strengthens credibility and trust (Wilson & Knighton, 2021; Macnamara, 2012). Because ethical behaviour cannot be replaced by symbolic communication alone, legitimacy-oriented PR places a strong emphasis on the coherence between organizational activities and stated messages (Merkelsen, 2011; Motion, 2005). By encouraging sustained involvement, understanding, and trust, stakeholder relationship management further enhances legitimacy (Kim & Kim, 2016; Kelleher, 2001). Relationship-based PR allows firms to

address stakeholder concerns and adjust to evolving expectations, rather than concentrating solely on persuasion (Kim & Kim, 2016). Communicating about corporate social responsibility is a crucial legitimacy tactic that enables businesses to show that they are in line with moral and social principles (Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009; Marschlich, 2022). However, CSR communication only contributes to legitimacy when CSR communication is perceived as sincere and supported by significant corporate activities (Merkelsen, 2011; Neuner, 2020).

Reputation and trust develop cumulatively through consistent behaviour and communication over time (Wæraas & Maor, 2014). Public assessments of legitimacy in digital contexts are increasingly influenced by social media interactions and online conversations, necessitating ongoing observation and response communication (Etter et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2024). Public relations contribute to the transformation of legitimacy from a reactive defence mechanism into a long-term organizational asset through

consistent narratives, ethics involvement, and relationship management (Spicer, 2013; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021).

3.6. Public Relations Strategies and Communication Practices

Public relations tactics use both digital and conventional technologies to operationalize their communication objectives (Davis, 2000, 2008; Macnamara, 2012). When employed strategically and morally, traditional tools such as press releases, media events, and communication campaigns continue to influence media agendas and public narratives (Davis, 2000; Spicer, 2013). On the other hand, direct communication, involvement, and real-time feedback are made possible by digital and social media platforms, which provide opportunities for discussion but also raise reputational concerns because of the rapid spread of information (Macnamara, 2012; Etter et al., 2018).

Two-way symmetrical communication is a normative ideal that promotes discourse, listening, and balanced influence in traditional and digital environments (Motion, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2016). According to research, companies that use dialogic communication techniques are more likely to develop credibility, trust, and legitimacy (Wilson & Knighton, 2021; Merkelsen, 2011). Public relations strengthen its position as a strategic function crucial to the creation of public opinion and organizational legitimacy by encouraging participation rather than depending solely on persuasion (Spicer, 2013; Edwards, 2012).

3.7. Challenges and Ethical Issues in Public Relations Practice

Despite its strategic significance in influencing public opinion and maintaining organizational legitimacy, public relations face several ethical and professional obstacles (Merkelsen, 2011; Motion, 2005). One major conundrum is where to draw the line between manipulation and moral persuasion (Motion, 2005). Manipulative tactics based on deceit or selective disclosure may produce temporary acquiescence but eventually erode trust and legitimacy, whereas genuine persuasion depends on openness, reasoned reasoning, and respect for public autonomy (Merkelsen, 2011; Wilson & Knighton, 2021). Thus, ethical communication is both a strategic imperative and a moral obligation from the legitimacy standpoint (Macnamara, 2012; Motion, 2005).

These issues are exacerbated by the modern communication environment, characterized by the rapid dissemination of false information and erosion of institutional confidence (Chung & Nah, 2013). False or inaccurate narratives can spread swiftly through digital and social media channels, frequently influencing public opinion before corrective communication can take place (Etter et al., 2018). Credibility crises arise when discrepancies between an organization's statements and actions are revealed or when communication is perceived as evasive (Merkelsen, 2011). Accuracy, transparency, and accountability are crucial for successful public relations practices, as research indicates that defensive or dishonest reactions often worsen the loss of legitimacy (Motion, 2005; Wilson & Knighton, 2021).

Evaluating public opinion and organizational legitimacy remains an ongoing challenge (Noyon et al., 2020; Neuner, 2020). While polls, media research, and digital analytics provide useful indicators, they frequently record sentiment at the surface level rather than through more profound legitimacy assessments based on morality, trust, and values (Noyon et al., 2020). Concerns regarding validity, representativeness, and ethical data use have been raised due to the increasing reliance on social media analytics (Etter et al., 2018; Neuner, 2020). Therefore, to avoid oversimplifying intricate legitimacy processes, an effective PR strategy necessitates a balanced approach that incorporates quantitative measurements with qualitative insights (Merkelsen, 2011).

The integrative discussion emphasizes how communication shapes public opinion and organizational legitimacy (McCombs, 2017; Merkelsen, 2011). Collective assessments of organizational behaviour are reflected in public opinion, whereas legitimacy is a longer-lasting social acceptance that results from these assessments over time (Hannigan & Kueneman, 1977; Noyon et al., 2020). Public relations mediate this relationship by shaping media discourse, framing organizational activities, and encouraging stakeholder engagement (Davis, 2000, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2016). Legitimacy influences media access, stakeholder trust, and message credibility, resulting in feedback loops that can either improve or worsen an organization's reputation (Yoon, 2005; Wilson & Knighton, 2021).

The literature highlights the strategic role of the public relations department as an organizational actor responsible for overseeing the interface between businesses and their social contexts (Edwards, 2012; Spicer, 2013). PR aids sense-making, risk detection, and well-informed decision-making beyond technical communication tasks, especially in situations involving uncertainty, crisis, and public contestation (Spicer, 2013; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021). This means that practitioners and organizations must prioritize ethical and transparent communication, view public relations as a strategic

management role, and use dialogic approaches that acknowledge the public as active participants in building legitimacy (Macnamara, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2016; Wilson & Knighton, 2021).

The review concludes by highlighting several research gaps and future directions (Merkelsen, 2011; Neuner, 2020). Public opinion research, legitimacy theory, and public relations studies are not well integrated into the current body of knowledge (Patel et al., 2005; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023). Methodological approaches frequently focus on short-term, cross-sectional indicators that fail to represent legitimacy as a dynamic process, and sector-specific and cross-cultural legitimacy dynamics remain understudied (Noyon et al., 2020; Wæraas, 2020). To better understand how public relations shape's public opinion and maintains organizational legitimacy over time, future research should use mixed-method approaches, longitudinal and comparative designs, and integrative theoretical models that link PR strategies to the dimensions of legitimacy (Noyon et al., 2020; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2022).

4. Discussion

This review aims to compile the body of knowledge regarding how public relations (PR) influences public opinion and upholds organizational legitimacy (Davis, 2000; Merkelsen, 2011; Spicer, 2013). The results show that four interconnected mechanisms, media relations and agenda-setting, framing and story construction, stakeholder involvement and conversation, and crisis and legitimacy management, are the main ways PR affects these outcomes (Davis, 2000, 2008; Rice & Bartlett, 2006; Kim & Kim, 2016; Merkelsen, 2011). Collectively, these strategies show that public relations functions as a strategic communication process entrenched in larger legitimacy-building dynamics rather than only for promotional or symbolic purposes (Edwards, 2012; Spicer, 2013). The literature mostly supports studies on media influence, meaning-making, and legitimacy construction, despite some critical scholarship portraying PR as primarily one-way or instrumental (Motion, 2005; Merkelsen, 2011).

The results are consistent with the theories of agenda-setting and media impact, which highlight how communication processes shape public attention and issue importance (McCombs, 2017). Previous studies show that PR influences what is visible and believable in public discourse by being structurally ingrained in news production through information subsidies and source access (Davis, 2000, 2008). Additionally, media access models imply that an organization's credibility and legitimacy influence whether and how it is represented in the media (Yoon, 2005). This reciprocal relationship supports the review's conclusion that legitimacy and public opinion reinforce one another through mediated communication (Merkelsen, 2011; Noyon et al., 2020). However, this convergence coexists with the difficulties noted in journalism-PR scholarship, which indicates persistent disputes over credibility, professional norms, and narrative control (Shin & Cameron, 2005; Verčič & Colić, 2016). These conflicts highlight the conditional nature of media power by influencing whether PR messages are accepted as factual information or rejected as advocacy messages (Chung & Nah, 2013).

The review also supports strategic framing and legitimation studies that highlight how organizations deliberately influence public perceptions of contentious issues (Rice & Bartlett, 2006; Chermak & Weiss, 2005). Previous studies have shown that framing affects public acceptance, culpability attribution, and moral assessment, especially in high-stakes situations (Rice & Bartlett, 2006). This review emphasizes PR's intermediary function of PR in creating interpretive frameworks that assist the public in understanding corporate behaviour, building on this body of knowledge (Edwards, 2012; Schoenberger-Orgad, 2007, 2009). By highlighting its role in social negotiation and meaning production, this goes beyond portrayals of PR as reputational "spin" (Edwards, 2012). Therefore, PR is positioned as a facilitator of public understanding rather than merely a persuasive tool, reinforcing the conceptualization of PR as a cultural intermediary (Schoenberger-Orgad, 2009).

It becomes clear that Dialogic communication and stakeholder participation are especially important for establishing legitimacy (Kim & Kim, 2016; Wilson & Knighton, 2021). The results are consistent with the normative models of two-way communication, which contend that organizations increase legitimacy by encouraging communication, responsiveness, and trust (Motion, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2016). According to engagement-oriented research, legitimacy is reinforced when the public views communication as courteous, inclusive, and focused on the public interest (Wilson & Knighton, 2021). However, the analysis also recognizes critical viewpoints cautioning that if involvement is not mirrored in corporate behaviour, dialogic activities may become symbolic (Motion, 2005; Merkelsen, 2011). This comparison provides crucial conditional insight: conversation only advances legitimacy when it is seen as authentic and when communication is coupled with a significant organizational response (Merkelsen, 2011; Wilson & Knighton, 2021).

The dynamics of legitimacy are further complicated by the expanding role of digital communications (Etter et al., 2018). The review concludes that legitimacy is increasingly generated in networked environments where online narratives, influencer communication, and social media discourse co-produce public evaluations, consistent with previous scholarship (Etter et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2024).

Online engagement measures and digital sentiment analysis offer important insights into public opinion, but the research also highlights their drawbacks (Etter et al., 2018). Online metrics may not accurately reflect larger audiences or adequately convey the pragmatic, moral, and cognitive aspects of legitimacy (Noyon et al., 2020; Neuner, 2020). This highlights a methodological conflict in modern PR research: legitimacy evaluation necessitates multi-method approaches to prevent oversimplification, while digital data expands the analytical reach (Noyon et al., 2020).

Finally, the results are consistent with more general legitimacy research that highlights the institutional and political aspects of legitimacy building (Hannigan & Kueneman, 1977; Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023). According to research on legitimacy politics and public sector communication, public acceptance is shaped by institutional frameworks, governance narratives, and elite signaling (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2023; Wæraas, 2020). By incorporating these viewpoints, it is suggested that PR departments function both within larger institutional ecosystems and at the organizational level (Spicer, 2013; Marschlich & Ingenhoff, 2021). Therefore, managing legitimacy necessitates the concurrent negotiation of political environments, media systems, and social norms (Ordeix-Rigo & Duarte, 2009; Marschlich, 2022).

Overall, the comparative research shows widespread consensus that public relations improve organizational legitimacy through strategic communication and impacts public opinion through media prominence and framing (Davis, 2000, 2008; McCombs, 2017; Merckelsen, 2011). The biggest disagreement in the literature relates to authenticity and ethics (Motion, 2005; Merckelsen, 2011). While engagement-oriented literature highlights public interest, trust, and transparency as the cornerstones of long-term legitimacy (Kim & Kim, 2016; Wilson & Knighton, 2021), critical viewpoints warn that attempts to establish legitimacy may be symbolic or manipulative (Motion, 2005; Merckelsen, 2011). The general conclusion is that clear communication, meaningful participation, and messaging consistent with corporate behaviour are the best ways for public relations to strengthen organizational legitimacy (Macnamara, 2012; Wilson & Knighton, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This review investigated the function of public relations in influencing public opinion and maintaining organizational legitimacy by combining theoretical and empirical findings from communication studies, organizational theory, and legitimacy research. The results show that public relations is not just a technical or promotional instrument, but also a strategic management activity that actively mediates interactions between corporations and their publics. Public relations significantly affect how corporations are viewed, assessed, and accepted in society through media relations, framing and story development, stakeholder involvement, and crisis communication.

This review emphasizes the dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between public opinion and organizational legitimacy. While legitimacy influences the efficacy, trustworthiness, and reception of corporate communication, public opinion provides a social framework in which legitimacy judgments are formed. Public relations play a crucial role in regulating this reciprocal process by organizing information flows, forming interpretive frameworks, and promoting communication between organizations and stakeholders. Public relations can create long-lasting legitimacy that goes beyond temporary reputation management when communication tactics align with moral principles, cultural norms, and organizational conduct.

However, the report also emphasizes that communication alone is insufficient to ensure legitimacy. Strategic messaging that is opaque, unethical, or inconsistent in behaviour runs the risk of being viewed as manipulative, which erodes public acceptance and trust. The necessity for legitimacy-oriented PR strategies is further increased by current issues, such as false information, dwindling media credibility, and increased scrutiny made possible by Internet communication. In this situation, organizations need to abandon one-way persuasion in favor of dialogic and participatory strategies that acknowledge the public as active participants in the creation of meaning and legitimacy.

In summary, public relations are a crucial organizational function that connects public trust, accountability, and governance with communication strategy. This review promotes a more thorough understanding of how corporations acquire and sustain societal acceptance in complicated communication situations by fusing legitimacy theory with public opinion management. The results highlight the significance of relationship-centred, ethical, and transparent public relations in maintaining organizational legitimacy and promoting long-term organizational survival for both academics and practitioners.

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest were present in this research, ensuring the integrity and objectivity of the findings.

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