EXPLORING PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONER'S USE OF THEORIES IN CAMPAIGN PLANNING MESSAGE DESIGN.

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September 2018

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1. This work is composed by me.
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Contents

Wordcount:

Total	13,726
Dissertation Body (Chapters 1-5)	**11,966**

Abstract

The research attempts to begin a discussion on the relationship between theory and practice with regards to public relations campaign planning message design, specifically surrounding the use of communication models/theories which inform the way messages are designed. The research is therefore an exploration of three ideas within the theoretical realm of public relations and communications, and the usage of theories by practitioners across a diverse and multitude of sectors, organisations and internationally. The research first looks at the literature, approaches and theories of constructivism, cognitive dissonance, nudge theory, relevance theory, inference and metaphor. The researcher then interviewed 14 professional public relations and communication practitioners to ascertain if they use the theories and attempts to begin to ask the question of how they use the theories. The research has found these professionals, whilst using theory, do so less consciously and more subconsciously, and were not always aware that they were using a theory until prompted with a description of the theory itself.

Key words:

Public Relations, Message Design, Campaign Planning, Sperber, Wilson, Relevance Theory, Cognition, Inference, Linguistics, World-View, Nudge Theory.

Chapter One: Introduction

The research attempts to begin a discussion on the relationship between theory and practice with regards to campaign planning message design, specifically surrounding the use of communication models/theories which inform the way messages are designed.

Public relations, campaign planning and message design are used broadly here to think of how theories of communication affect the way that messages are designed in public relations campaign planning.

> *A public relations campaign is a series of activities that are planned in advance and relate to a specific goal. This contrasts with other areas of PR, such as general ongoing publicity tactics, paid advertising, and reacting to events. Ultimately a public relations campaign has three characteristics: identifying an objective, finding the message that will help achieve that objective and communicating that message to the appropriate audience.*(Lister, 2018)

Whilst not the most academic of sources, the researcher found this definition to be the most concise and helpful in highlighting how this research approached the importance of public relations campaign planning message design, and this definition highlights the key areas of this, objectives, messaging and communicating that message.

Whilst channels of communicating, and the objectives that help to define and plan key messages do not feature so fully within the research, it is important to understand this research within the wider context of channels and objectives. Whilst they are not so featured in the research, they are *in-view* when determining the theories that underpin the way we communicate. These theories help inform us as to the best way to design or construct a message, in turn help to achieve the objective, and determine the appropriate channel for each message.

The research here incorporated is two-fold; it is both academic literature research that incorporates research on well-known subjects in public relations such as constructivism, cognitive dissonance and nudge theory. It also encapsulates the linguistical-psychological approach to communication as developed by Sperber and Wilson in relevance theory. The research is also qualitative, involving interviews with 14 communication professionals from a range of sectors and organisations, both public and private sector, in-house and consultancy based.

The research has found these professionals, whilst using theory, do so less consciously and more subconsciously, and were not always aware that they were using a theory until prompted with a description of the theory itself.

The second chapter, ‘In Theory’ covers the literature and the three major theoretical areas of the dissertation: constructivism/cognitive dissonance; nudge theory; relevance theory/inference and metaphor. There is an attempt to tie the theories together, as well as some concluding thoughts.

The third chapter, methodology, covers a wide range of ‘administrative’ areas of the research: from the research gap; the research ideology; sampling; the sample itself; the areas the research has looked at; the interview’s style; questions and structure; as well as the research ethical framework.

The fourth chapter titled ‘Results and Discussion’, looks to present and discuss the results and findings. There is an attempt to tie the literature and the findings together, primarily by using the theories to categories the interviews. The fourth chapter's penultimate section is entirely dedicated to the use of theory by the practitioners interviewed, before making a summary conclusion.

The fifth and final chapter concludes by discussing more fully the results, as well as how the three major theories hold together. Finally, the concluding chapter addresses the research weaknesses, as well as possibilities for further related research.

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Chapter One: 573 words

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Chapter Two: In Theory

Introduction

The theories discussed in this chapter are constructivist theories and cognitive dissonance; followed by nudge theory; relevance theory, implication and metaphor. It should be noted that nudge and relevance theory are both constructivist theories. Message design is based on the concept of communicating ideas, that is we intend to communicate and design messages which will communicate effectively with audiences/stakeholders or publics. The art or science of communicating, effectively, then is grounded in communication theories, and in public relations this has widely included constructivist approaches (rather than theories), as well as the use of psychology's cognitive dissonance and sociology's nudge theory. The argument the researcher makes is that these are both constructivist in approach (on-the-whole) and that in terms of public relations, important to understanding how practitioners can better craft messages. Relevance theory has, to the knowledge of the researcher, never been included in public relations studies or academic work, however, it comes from a cross-over of cognitive-psychology and linguistics, and has been applied in the related [to public relations] field of advertising. The chapter concludes with a tying together of the research literature.

Constructivism

Communication affects our cognitive environment, and also our world-view, or frame-of-reference (constructivist pedagogy/psychology and philosophy). Constructivist thinking can be traced back to the moral philosophy of Immanuel Kant (Rawls, 1989), however, it is most commonly associated with John Dewey, Bruner, Piaget and Vygotsky (University College Dublin, n.d.).

Whilst often termed as an epistemological approach, it is also an important theory in its approach to understanding the audience of a public relations message, and how to reach that audience better, by essentially, understanding how their epistemology and world-view is the same and yet different from the communicators.

Vaughn Shannon spoke at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, stating: *"…reality, whatever that is, is not so important to understanding action compared to the world as it is understood by the people who occupy it. Material and other factors are filtered or interpreted through lenses of meaning derived from personal and social beliefs."* (2003, p. 11). Shannon suggests that the two fields of constructivism and political psychology, whilst not the same, have an area of cross-over. This concept that individuals interpret and understand the world according to our 'lenses of meaning' – our personal constructs based on our personal and societal beliefs; definably relativistic, is a key component of existentialism and post-modernism. This is pointed out by Toth, who linked constructivism to post-modernist thinking, writing:

> *"Postmodernism underwrites a worldview that relies on constructivism, in which knowledge is created through the process of interaction, making communication central to the social construction of truth and reality (Littlejohn, 1992). Although there can be no unified postmodern theory or collective set of approaches to mark post- modernism (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997), it is possible to say that there are countervailing trends of postmodernism." (Toth, 2009, p. 204).*

Our world views are formed, according to constructivism, through life experience, and constructivism tends towards relativism with world-views formed as a subjective or social construction:

> *"…knowledge is constructed by individuals over the course of life*

> *experience. Its epistemological foundation tends toward relativism insofar as knowledge is not a direct representation of objective reality so much as a subjective or social construction (Boghossian, 2006)." (Wilkinson & Hanna, 2016, p. 2)*

As Raaz & Wehmeier quote, history is *'strongly depend*[-ent] *upon the cognitive and social contexts of their emergence (Schmidt, 2003; Goertz, 2001).'* (2011, p. 260). This is also true of individuals. According to constructivism, we are the product of our cognitive and social context - both in our development and our current 'place'. Our world-view is thus formed by our cognitive and social context.

Constructivism is widely used in public relations and communications, as evidenced by this section from Wehmeier and Schultz's chapter in Ihlen, Bartlett and May's book:

> *"The social constructivist perspective does not aim to develop coherent stories or build the story about singular counter-storytellers who are able to deconstruct and criticize official stories. Here stories are not seen as instruments, used to persuade publics, but as part of the narrative construction of social reality. Actors tell stories not only for others, but also to themselves and to develop their own identity. A constructivist perspective on storytelling means analyzing the accounts presented by different actors and especially corporate CSR communications as stories used within the social negotiation of reality."* (Wehmeier & Schultz, 2011, pp. 472–473)

As well as its use in Harris & Fleisher's work:

> *"Constructivism is concerned with the socially constructed and embedded nature of norms and 'reality' in the international community. Rationality is, at the very least, contingent on a socially constructed and accepted appreciation of what constitutes rational behaviour at any given time."* (Harris & Fleisher, 2017, p. 137)

Along with its appearance 16 times in '*Public Relations and Social Theory: Key Figures, Concepts and Developments*' (Ihlen et al., 2018), mostly in Verhoeven's chapter (2018, pp. 99–115) Heide's chapter (2018, pp. 215–232), and it also appears in the books conclusion (2018, pp. 462–427).[1]

What all these uses suggest is that constructivism is a widely used underpinning epistemology and philosophical concept in public relations theories and academia. Constructivism is important to public relations campaign planning message design, because, as an approach, it determines how practitioners understand their audience, it could be used to 'get inside the head' of the audience, and not merely to communicate directly with them. If a practitioner can understand, broadly, the way the audience thinks and sees the world (their world-view), then broadly speaking the messages can be designed to target that 'way-of-thinking' that best 'cuts' into that world-view.

Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is defined as being:

> *"… concerned with the relations among cognitive elements (also called cognitions). An element is any belief, opinion, attitude, or piece of knowledge about anything—about other persons, objects, issues, oneself, and so on. Three possible relations might hold between any two cognitive elements. They might be irrelevant to each other, have nothing to do with each other… Two cognitive elements might be consonant (consistent) with each other; they might hang together, form a package.… Finally, two cognitive elements might be dissonant (inconsistent) with each other. The careful specification of a dissonant relation is this: Two elements are said to be in a dissonant relation if the opposite of one element follows from the other..."* (O'Keefe, 2016, p. 77)

[1] It is also shown in Falkheimer and Heide (Coombs & Holladay, 2010, pp. 511–526); Dolea and Collister's chapters (L'Etang, McKie, Snow, & Xifra, 2016, pp. 274-288; & 360–371); Bentele (van Ruler et al., 2004, pp. 489–490); Smith's '*Natural Reflections: Human Cognition at the Nexus of Science and Religion*' lecture (2009, p. xii, 13–14, 72–75, 116–117, 154n17, 170n29); Daymon and Holloway (2011, p. x; & 133).

Cognitive dissonance becomes an important subject, as we begin to understand how people devalue one inconsistent cognition over and above that of another – either through the use of a new consonant added to the consonant cluster. Another way is to delete or devalue the dissonant cognition. And as mentioned, devaluing the importance of the dissonant cognition (See: O'Keefe, 2016, p. 78). In this we can fit the theories surrounding belief-based models of attitudes, which effectively speaks of salient beliefs towards 'an object' and that one's attitude is based on those salient beliefs at those times *(O'Keefe, 2016, pp. 56–57)*.

Our salient beliefs about a subject affect our views, and all are rather time-relevant; things may be more 'relevant' to us, such as the NHS whilst a loved-one is undergoing NHS treatment. Our view of that particular treatment affects our view and attitudes towards the wider subject of the NHS at that time, whilst six months before the treatment of our loved-one began, we may have held an entirely different belief, or a less strongly-held conviction regarding the NHS.[2] O'Keefe notes that '*A second area of dissonance theory research that is relevant to persuasion concerns persons' propensities to expose themselves selectively to information.*' (2016, p. 83).This suggests that people tend to only listen to things that conform to their current ideological persuasion and which do not conflict with their currently held opinions. In social media, it is often termed the echo-chamber effect (Cf. Chater, 2016; Dubois & Blank, 2018; Nguyen, 2018; Passe, Drake, & Mayger, 2017).

Put more concisely, Smith writes:

> *"…the more people experience the psychological discomfort of having contradictory attitudes or beliefs, the more likely they will*

[2] For further discussion on the first tenant of "Relevance Theory" see the relevantly titled section of this chapter.

> *reduce the discomfort, usually by changing one of their attitudes or beliefs. An important element of this theory is the concept of selective exposure, which refers to seeking information that supports a currently held attitude while avoiding information that does not support it."* (R. D. Smith, 2013)

Nudge theory

Nudge theory could certainly be within the realm of constructivism as it can rely on the target public having a cognitive dissonance, or at least rely on them *possibly* having a cognitive dissonance. However, cognitive dissonance isn't mentioned in *Nudge* (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008), nor is it mentioned in *The Last Mile* (Soman, 2015), two key texts on nudge theory.

Soman author of 'The Last Mile' writes that:

> No matter who you are, whether you are selling soap or shampoo, whether you are a government looking after the welfare of citizens, or an agency promoting financial well-being and better health, or an institution that is responsible for collecting taxes, you are definitely in the business of changing people's behavior.(2015, p. 26)

This is an essential job for many public relations and communications professionals – we desire to change people's behaviour on-behalf of the organisations we represent. One of the ways that this can be done is through the use of nudge theory, Thaler and Sunstein, who are the originators of the theory, write:

> *A nudge, as we will use the term, is any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not mandates. Putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not.* (2008, p. 6)

Thaler and Sunstein call those who use this approach "choice architects", and consider them a part of their 'movement', which they call *libertarian* *paternalism*.(2008, pp. 3 & 5). Nudge theory, they argue, is predicated on two key aspects:

> *The libertarian aspect of our strategies lies in the straightforward insistence that, in general, people should be free to do what they like—and to opt out of undesirable arrangements if they want to do so.* [And…] *The paternalistic aspect lies in the claim that it is legitimate for choice architects to try to influence people's behavior in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and better. In other words, we argue for self-conscious efforts, by institutions in the private sector and also by government, to steer people's choices in directions that will improve their lives.* (2008, p. 5)

Essentially, the objective is to provide an alternative, more attractive option, over and above the less attractive current option/choice that an individual makes. They are *free to choose* (2008, p. 5 referencing Milton Friedman), but choice architects make the *better* option *more* desirable.

Nudges and nudge theory are similar to O'Keefe's prompts:

> *A prompt (reminder) is a simple cue that that makes behavioral performance salient and hence can trigger the behavior… A large number of experiments have demonstrated the potential of such prompts to influence behavior… There are probably at least two necessary conditions for a prompt to be effective in inducing behavior. First, the recipients must presumably already have the appropriate positive attitude; reminding people to do something they don't want to do is unlikely to be very effective. Second, the recipients must likely already believe themselves capable of performing the behavior (expressed in terms of reasoned action theory, perceived behavioral control must be sufficiently high); prompting people to do something they don't think they can do is presumably unlikely to be very effective. So when people are willing to per- form a behavior (positive attitude) and think themselves able to perform the behavior (high perceived behavioral control), but nevertheless aren't doing the behavior, then perhaps all that's needed is a simple prompt.*(2016, pp. 220–221)

The key difference between prompts and nudges is essentially that prompts are there to *remind* or *get* people to take a positive action they already want to take, but for whatever-reason haven not done so yet; whereas nudges are designed to get someone to take an action regardless of their like or dislike for the perceived action. A smoker does not want to give up their addiction, necessarily, however, they may want to quit (their desire to quit has to exceed their desire to smoke). To get them to that point of desiring to quit beyond desiring to smoke, the suggested method is to *nudge* them in the right direction, step-by-step over a protracted period of time. Whereas prompts remind you to do something you want to do, nudges persuade you to do positive actions you do not desire.

Relevance theory

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson developed relevance theory in the late 1980s and through the 1990s in linguistics. As a theory, it has crossed into the mainstream through hermeneutics, but also been implemented in fields such as advertising. Their central argument for developing relevance theory is that there is *no general theory of communication,* nor can there be, or should there be.

Whilst relevance theory is from within linguistics, it is a multi-disciplinary theory, using cognitive psychology as well as analysing the communication theories such as coding-decoding (the code model, which dates back to Aristotle), and the ostension-inference model (as developed by Paul Grice).

Whilst coming from ‘linguistics’, their book ‘*Relevance – Communication and Cognition*’ (1st Edition – 1986; 2nd Edition – 1995) is predicated on the concept that for communication to be effective it must be *relevant* and that this is manifest in cognitive processes. It is also heavily grounded in rhetoric and theories surrounding rhetoric.

To simplify the theory is to state:

1. From the perspective of the communicator, how is what I am communicating relevant to my audience?
2. And from the perspective of the audience – how is what is being communicated relevant to me?

To put another way, as Sperber and Wilson wrote in the preface to their second edition: ‘To communicate is to claim an individuals’ attention: hence to communicate is to imply that the information communicated is relevant.’ (Sperber & Wilson, 2004, p. vii). This they call the principle of relevance (1st Edition) or second or communicative principle of relevance (2nd Edition).

They further write that the presumption of optimal relevance is:

(a) The set of assumptions [*a set of assumptions the communicator intended to make manifest*] which the communicator intends to make manifest to the addressee is relevant enough to make it worth the addressee’s while to process the ostensive stimulus.

(b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one the communicator could have used to communicate [*a set of assumptions the communicator intended to make manifest*]. (Sperber & Wilson, 2004, p. 158)

Or put another way:

Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber & Wilson, 2004, p. 158)

The first principle of relevance theory is that human cognition is geared towards the maximization of relevance – that is, to find the most relevant information from a given communication, as communicators gear cognitively to communicate the things they perceive to be of most relevance, to them and in turn their audience.

Sperber and Wilson also argue that sometimes to communicate effectively we do not directly state what we mean, but infer what we mean. This is to say we ask our audience to infer a meaning we do not directly state. Francisco Javier Díaz Pérez (2000) presents the below scenario:

1.a. Claire: Do you like *The Sun also Rises?*

1.b. Peter: I love all Hemingway's novels.

Whilst Claire's question is not directly answered by Peter, he has communicated 'relevantly' that *The Sun also Rises* is a novel by Hemmingway, and that he loves all of Hemingway's novels, but it requires that Claire presumes that *The Sun also Rises* is a novel by Hemingway, (this is an implicated premise), and that Claire therefore concludes that Peter loves *The Sun also Rises* (this is an implicated conclusion). Claire could add the following presuppositions:

1. *For Whom the Bells Toll* and *The Old Man and the Sea* are other novels by Hemingway.
2. Hemingway belongs to *the Lost Generation*.
3. People who love Hemingway's novels generally like other writers belonging to *the Lost Generation* as well.

And Claire could thus make the following implicated conclusions:

1. Peter loves *For Whom the Bells Toll* and *The Old Man and the Sea*.

2. Peter surely likes other writers belonging to *the Lost Generation*.

Whilst premise 1 and 2 are more evident (to those who know Hemingway's work and Hemingway) and thus implicated conclusion 1 is also relevant, the relevance of implicated premise 3 and conclusion 2 is less evident, but still may be logically *inferred* from Peter's remark by Claire.

Or as Sperber and Wilson writes: "Some implicatures are made so strongly manifest that the hearer can scarcely avoid recovering them. Others are made less strongly manifest. It is enough that the hearer should pay attention to some of these weaker implicatures for the relevance of the intended interpretation to become manifest" (Sperber & Wilson, 2004, p. 197). This does not mean that the implicatures are correct, merely that they can be made. In public relations message design, usually we would look to limit the implications that can be made that are incorrect. This may be to prevent damage to reputation; to engage appropriately with the audience; to avoid offence to an audience; or to alter their behaviour effectively in the desired manner. Whilst we would still design messages that implicatures can be made from. Though this is not always the case, sometimes we may wish to allow implicatures to be made which are wrong – for example, to provide cover and deniability, arguably unethical, but never-the-less, it is important to be aware of the potential for this.

Pérez makes the point, quoting Geis, that overt claims, such as:

1. this product is the best because although it costs 10% more (by example) but actually comes with feature a, b and c as standard.

Are not as effective as implicated claims such as:

2. this product comes with features a, b and c as standard.

Geis says: “One doesn’t have to defend such [indirect] claims and consumers are less likely to defend against them than overtly made claims. There is another motivation for employing conversational implicatures. Since they have to be “worked out” by the listener, the listener may find them to be more persuasive than asserted claims.” (Perez, 2000, p. 45).

This form of inference in communications is similar to the way Kuhn’s work on ‘learning’ expresses *how* we learn by similarity:

> *“…a conceptual structure is established by grouping objects into similarity classes corresponding to the extension of concepts. It is an important feature of Kuhn’s account that this grouping can be achieved solely by learning to identify similarities between objects within a particular similarity class and dissimilarities to objects ascribed to other similarity classes. Hence, simple categories like ‘duck’, ‘goose’, and ‘swan’ may be transmitted from one generation to the next solely by extracting similarity and dissimilarity relations from the exemplars on exhibit.”* (Andersen, Barker, & Chen, 2006, p. 22)

It could be said that we learn by associated inference – if I tell you that I saw a white bird on the river – you can infer that it is a swan. You may or may not be correct, but it is inferable.

Implication and Metaphor

Relevance theory thus has two approaches, one being ‘how is our message relevant to our audience’ and two being ‘does what I imply become inferred by the audience’ and is my implication or the metaphor I use only inferable in the way that I desire my communication to be inferred, or are there other inference that I do not wish my audience/public/stakeholders to infer? An example could be to talk about ‘the diamond standard’ when speaking of a dishwasher tablet.

The implication and inference is that the tablet is of ‘the highest of standards’ (diamond, gold, silver, platinum, bronze etc rankings) as well as being ‘the best’ because it ranks above the rest (diamond standards are usually higher than other standards). There are also metaphorical implications and inference which can be made. These metaphorical implications and inferences are that it is ‘hard or tough on stains’ (as diamonds are ‘tough’ and hard); that it makes glass items ‘crystal’ clearer (as diamonds are the ‘crystal clear’ gemstone); that it is a purer product (because of the tendency to associate diamonds with purity); and that it is also a luxury tablet (as diamonds are often considered the height of luxury). Some of these examples can be made quickly, and there are even tertiary inferences and implications that can be made on the secondary ones, such as ‘it’s a luxury product, therefore it is more expensive’ (because luxury and price are associated); and whilst it is ‘tough or hard on stains’ may it be too hard on my expensive 18th Century Wedgewood collection. Whilst not all of these secondary or even tertiary ones may be made, they can be This is why communicators in advertising may advise to use phrases like ‘at the extremely low price of…’ or ‘on offer this week’ – to counter the ‘luxury-price’ affiliation, or they may directly counter the hard or tough on stains by stating, ‘hard on stains, gentle on dishes’ – these phrases have the double effect of drawing your attention to the specific phrases the communicator wishes you to make, whilst secondarily preventing, or encouraging you not to ‘go to far’ down the rabbit hole.

Perez’s review of British Newspaper Advertising, gives the +following example:

> *“More than a perfume, a jewel. (Time Magazine, 30-11-96)”* (2000, p. 47)

Whilst the strongest implication is that this is ‘A highly valued perfume’ (2000, p. 47). Perez writes:

> *"However if the addresser had wanted to transmit just this, he could have done it directly. He probably wanted the audience to recover weaker implicatures, which out-weigh the extra processing effort caused by...[*the *'A highly valued perfume*' inference*] ... such as... This perfume will give you a touch of distinction… ….If you wear this perfume you will feel more attractive… ….This perfume is a sign of a high socio-economic status."* (2000, p. 48)

The metaphor-inference model of relevance theory requires thought about possible *negative* as well as positive *implications* that can be drawn from communicators metaphors and inferences.

Concluding thoughts

It appears obvious to the researcher that public relations can benefit from a combining, at least theoretically, of the three theories above discussed. All are constructivist in their approach - a requirement of a world-view socially constructed through experience. Relevance requires it, cognitive dissonance demands it, and nudge theory rests upon it. Implication and metaphor are grounded in a relativistic mutual understanding, which requires a shared world-view, as defined by constructivism. It is the belief of the researcher that if communicators are required to change a world-view, then they need to communicate in such a way that it won't threaten the initial world-view head-on. Individuals are not so keen to have their frame-of-reference/world-view challenged directly, they will defend against it. If, however, the communicator infers a premise, and they imply a conclusion based on that premise - they have deduced - logically and emotionally – and accepted that conclusion as truth, even subconsciously, thereby altering their frame-of-reference/world-view without actually challenging it head-on. Individuals often hold confliction in tension within their frame-of-reference (cognitive dissonance), but it allows nudging, in a piece-by-piece fashion to change such a frame-of-reference over-time, to communicate the change communicators in public relations desire in their target publics. At least, that is in theory what the literature could suggest.

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Chapter Two: 4055 words

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Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter covers 'the gap' in current research, the research ideology (and methodology) and discussion of the purposive sampling techniques. The chapter covers the types of people interviewed, their experience and a brief 'profile'; the areas the research covered during the semi-structured investigative interview process in a qualitative approach, the interview 'questions' and finally the ethical considerations the research took.

The Gap

There is limited research on the actual use of theory in practice with regards to communication theories and message design in campaign planning. This research aims to see if there is a clear link between practice and academia on this front, or if there is a blindness in academia or in practice to the others aspect of the discipline of public relations and communications.

Further to this, the research aims to see if relevance theory as developed by Sperber & Wilson (2004) in the field of linguistics and communication using cognitive psychology, which has been applied in advertising (Perez, 2000), is already at use in public relations and communications practice, under 'other names' or simply 'intuitively' and 'unconsciously' without acknowledgement. It is important to public relations as it deals not only with audience and message relevancy, but also with implication and metaphor outworking in communication towards that audience.

Research Ideology

I have taken a pragmatic approach to my research, with a literalist understanding of individuals responses during interviews, whilst accounting for their unliteral answers. For example, when a practitioner answered that they did not use theory in practice or did not consciously use any theory in practice this was taken at face-value. However, if the practitioner later revealed that they thought about things in language that was similar, even if non-academic, to discuss concepts which were clearly included in theory, the research would note the theories, but would also note that they were not conscious of their use of theory. When a practitioner described ideas and concepts that form part of a theory these would be noted, whilst the researcher still accepted their answer of not using theory in practice. This creates a conscious-unconscious element to the research.

During the course of the research, it was prudent to take a constructivist approach to the ideas expressed in theory and practice, as this was a dominant underpinning of the theories the research found to be at use (or the opposite, it was directly counter the theories in use).

Sampling

The research looked to interview communications practitioners and used a purposive sampling method. It was preferable that the interviewees came from a broad spectrum of sectors and also had a wide range in their years of work-experience. They worked in-house or on a consultancy basis, and this may impact their answers.

Practitioners were asked to volunteer, after initial email contact. The initial contact was based on actively working in public relations, using LinkedIn. Former course University graduates and four practitioners were referred to the research through two different practitioners. Of the 50 plus practitioners that were contacted and those that responded, the researcher cut down the respondents to just 14 (time frame for the research was the largest constraint). The sample was designed to include private and public sector professionals, with private making up the dominant element, as there were many fields to cover. There were no respondents from the health, national or multi-national government (e.g. UK Governement, European Council or United Nations), though two interviewees had previously worked as communications professionals within the police and utilities. None of the interviewees worked (or had worked) within the financial sector. The design of the selection of interviewees was to provide as broad a range of sectors, whilst also pairing, to provide a double confirmation approach.

Interviewees – Experience and Expertise

Four of the panel worked exclusively in the public sector, the other ten worked primarily in the private sector, with four of those working also in the public sector. All of the practitioners were at management, senior management or director level. 8 worked internationally and/or outside of the UK (predominantly) whilst the other 6 worked exclusively within the UK. Those working in the public sector had done so for less than a decade as had four of those working in the private sector. The other six, who worked in the private sector, had done so for more than a decade each, the total years experience of all our interviewees builds up to 182 years of combined experience.

Eight of the individuals interviewed held master’s degrees in communications and/or public relations; four interviewees held doctorates (though only two had doctorates in communications); three held journalism undergraduates; two held communications based undergraduates. Only one of the practitioners held no communications-based degree.[3] For more information on the make-up of those who were interviewed, please see Appendix I: Interviewees. Because of the high level of qualifications many of the interviewees held, it could be expected that they would have an understanding, or at least of heard of some of the theories this research pertains to.

Campaign Planning & Message Design

Whilst this research looks to message design in the campaign planning process, it is important to realise that it covers a broader aspect of message design than perhaps first intended, and that is communication theories that underpin the message design planning process. Within this, it has narrowly focused, on the following areas (which also served as the bullet point list of points to cover for the semi-structured interviews):

- Relevance theory
- Nudge theory
- Cognitive dissonance
- Constructivist approach
- Influencers
- Implicature and metaphor
- Communication styles
- The planning process
- Authenticity

This does not mean that other theories and ideas have been ignored; during the initial research phase domino theory and other theories were extensively studied.

[3] Despite their years of working in Public Relations, they also do not hold any professional qualifications, though they have done many training courses – both as a student and a lecturer.

However, their use remained undetermined during the panel interview process. With regards to this initial research, during the practitioner panel interviews, it was determined that the other key area to look at during the post-interview stage of the research was Grunig's four models of communications (Wolstenholme et al., 2013, p. 15), which is discussed in the Theory and Practice Chapter of this research.

Questions

As part of the research, the concept was to use a semi-structured interview approach (the bullet point list is included above, under 'Campaign Planning and Message Design' within this chapter). Questions were asked based on the responses of the interviewees, rather than to specify questions from the start. Each interview covered the same ground, and 'discussion points' were used rather than specific questions. Interviewees were asked to talk about their background at the start of each interview, including their studies and previous jobs and their current role. The interviewees were then asked based on their responses, and were probed for more details, when appropriate. The final 'set' of 'questions' in the interview were based around authenticity; influencers/experts; and their personal/professional communication style. This was to see if any further information could be gathered about their approaches, because influencers/experts and authenticity can impinge on messages and their design intentions. Not all questions were the same, but the general gist of the questions, and the points were asked of every professional interviewed.

A note

Regarding the three main theories (constructivism/cognitive dissonance; nudge theory and relevance theory/inference-metaphor), it is important to outline some of the ways the research 'gathered' the evidence during the interviews:

Constructivism/Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance was a widely heard term by the practitioners, who were talking conceptually of cognitive dissonance. Notably practitioners C, D, G, H, K & L, who held advanced qualifications or are noted for many years of experience within public relations practice were using language typical of constructivism and cognitive dissonance, which prompted the researcher to raise the subject more formally. Conceptual discussions of cognitive dissonance would be discussions surrounding audiences whose ‘world-views had internal conflicts’ or ‘tension in the thinking of the audience’.

The other practitioners were asked if they had heard of cognitive dissonance, all asserted that they had. All practitioners were then asked to give their brief summary of how they understood the concept; once they had done so the researcher would give a definition from my relevant literature, so they could see how the researcher used the term in the research. The practitioner’s comments are in light of this, and not from before the formal discussion and definitions. As constructivism is a theoretical framework which underpins both cognitive dissonance, nudge theory, and relevance theory, it was the practitioner’s language that was used to determine if they were using constructivism. Constructivism was not mentioned as part of the interview. Language flagged as possible uses of constructivism included phrases such as: ‘world-view’, ‘perceptions’, ‘cognitions’, ‘relative’, ‘experiential’.

Nudge Theory

Like cognitive dissonance, most of the practitioners had heard of nudge theory. Those who had heard of nudge theory were asked to give a brief description in their own words, and then all participants (including those who hadn’t heard of the theory) were given a brief description by the interviewer. No one used nudge theory language prior to the interviewer raising the issue, except to say that nudge theory was always raised, by the researcher, on-the-back-of discussions surrounding cognitive dissonance.

Relevance Theory

Due to the nature of relevance theory, and it not being included in public relations literature, or being a well know theory in public relations circles, each interview included a description of relevance theory by the interviewer. The interviewer described it as two key principles– at its most basic level as '*the act of communicating implies that we have something relevant to say, the act of listening infers there is relevance for us in what is communicated*', and a general question, along the lines of '*how important is/do you use relevance as a measure of your messages*'. The second explanation was by way of the: diamond; Hemmingway; and perfume-jewel examples included in chapter two. The discussion surrounding inference-implication and metaphor was based around those examples, as was the responses of the practitioners to these examples and definitions of relevance theory.

Due to the way that the questions were asked, the results and findings have been presented through the individual lenses of the theories, as discussed in the literature. It should further be noted as there was limited discussion of any topic prior to it being raised, by any of the practitioners, those comments have not been included, as they pertain to no more than a paragraph combined.

Ethics

Ethics was ensured and adhered to through ethical approval via the University of Stirling Ethical Board, as well as the use of informed consent proformas. The key points of the informed consent proforma were reiterated at the start of each interview, and secondary oral consent was gained from the participants. The *Informed Consent Proforma* included a detailed information sheet about the interviews, as well as the research overview. It guaranteed the right to withdraw, before, after and during the research period and even after the submission of the dissertation. Further to this it guaranteed anonymity, meaning that no one should, other than to themselves, be identifiable from the final research paper. Although permission was sought and given to use job titles, the researcher felt that it was more appropriate to 'normalise' their job titles, where required, to prevent identifiability of the interviewees.

Conclusion

This chapter has covered the 'gap' in current research; the research ideology; the interviewees; the purposive sampling of the interviewees; their experience and expertise; as well as the areas of campaign planning and message design the research focused on; the qualitative approach through a semi-structured interview process, and finally the ethical considerations of the research. The next chapter – "In Theory and In Practice" will cover the literature for each of the key areas of campaign planning and messaging, and the results and findings of the research.

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Chapter Three: 1991 words

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Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

Introduction

In Practice is a merger of the findings and results of the study. It is heavily reliant on the understanding of the three theories discussed (in the same order) as in the previous chapter 'In Theory'. Prior to this is a brief description, with some results, of how the questions were put to the practitioners during the interview, in what context and why, and this is done in the same order as discussions of the three theories/ideas have been throughout this research.

Constructivism & Cognitive Dissonance

Whilst there is a strong academic tradition of constructivism and cognitive dissonance, there remains to be seen if it applies in practice as well as it does on paper, especially to the areas of communication theories in use in campaign planning - message design.

Cognitive Dissonance

Of the 14 professionals interviewed, only two interviewees outright stated, that because of their role they had to communicate information accurately, factually, and without bias, that cognitive dissonance was of no real concern. Their work in the public sector, specifically in Local Government, required accuracy and reporting facts. One of them suggested there was no real need for theories such as a cognitive dissonance and constructivism when communicating with their audience about when the local bin collection would be. Four practitioners, opposingly, considered Cogitative Dissonance an imperative factor in their work.

One practitioner gave the example of when they were heading a campaign to prevent smoking in children's play parks. They realised that tackling the actual issue directly would not worked, they needed to *nudge* their target audience - smoking parents. The best way to do this was to go through the children, using a *positive* campaign. They told the researcher, that they opted to promote a message of 'children learn from what they see' or 'children copy what they see'. This very campaign shows another theory in communications, not just cognitive dissonance (at work) - but also nudge theory.

Another gave an example when they worked for a larger regional water company, how the region they covered and the general public had a perception that their water was "the best in the world" and "the cleanest in the UK". However, the company was raising prices for consumers. The reason the company was raising their prices at that time, was because they needed to invest to make the water safer as it was failing on industry standards, contrary to the public perception. To explain the raising of prices, the practitioner found that instead of focusing on the 'falsehood' of safest, cleanest water in the world, that 'cleaning up the beaches' was a better message. The audience for this message could get on board more easily – the company needed to invest in cleaning water, instead of just 'pumping it into the ocean/on the beach'. Instead of tackling the cognitive inconsistency head on, they explained how they needed to treat the waste being poured into the ocean, and that the investment was to protect the environment. The practitioner informed the researcher that despite raising their prices higher than any other water company at the time, they had the highest customer satisfaction out of all the companies.

Two practitioners did not consider the holding of a world-view (constructivism) or cognitive dissonance to be particularly important to their communications strategies. One of these two practitioners, however, did note that they had to avoid ambiguity in their messages because people hold certain views culturally, such as the avoidance of the use of certain phrases. An example given was ‘the retirement watch’ in China, because the Chinese word for watch/clock having a similar sound/meaning to the word for death. Whilst the second practitioner noted that words do not always translate, and this becomes important for different audiences. A UK audience may perceive negatively a communication using ‘armor’ instead of ‘armour’, whilst an USA audience may perceive the use of ‘armour’ negatively over the use of ‘armor’. Whilst these differences are small, they suggested a world-view is held by an audience and that the audience has preconceptions about spelling (correctly). It also suggests that the implications of certain words or metaphors and that whilst we attempt to be clear in our language, we do have to understand that translating them may distort our message because of the cultural frame or perceptions and cognitive blocks.

Two other practitioners noted that their work did not require them to ‘actively think’ about the cognitive dissonance of their public/audience. However, the first of these two practitioners stated that if messages were seen as potentially creating a cognitive dissonance (and then anxiety), they would change it. Or if, as the second practitioner, informed the research, it would run into the road-block of a particularly widely-held cognition, then they would re-work-out the key message until its receivership by the intended audience was more acceptable. The first practitioner said that

> *"I don't think we actively think about that [cognitive dissonance], to be honest… I think that's something [which] kind of gets lost, maybe sometimes subconsciously we do, but not to a large degree, I'd say"*

Another practitioner informed the researcher of an example when the electronic manufacturer *Apple* released their first tablet, they tackled the most important cognitive block to buying a new tablet, other than price – the issue of 'I don't know how to use it'. Their campaign communicated with one simple phrase, "You already know how to use it". This cut straight to the issue of why one couldn't buy the tablet, because one couldn't use, it told them they already knew, either because they knew how to use other tablets, or because it was intuitive.[4]

One practitioner clearly stated that they were not really interested in changing behaviours in their current work, but previously cognitive dissonance had been a larger part of their work as they worked to change behaviour in their public sector work. Whilst they did not specify, they were not so-much speaking of purchasing behaviour as they were social and health based behavioural change.

Another practitioner stated that they do not actively think about cognitive dissonance in the initial message design phase, however, during the 'message testing' phase of their campaign process they determined what emotional reaction the participants had – negative, positive or if it created as 'bubbling' negative emotion (resentment, anger etc) then that was when the considered if cognitive dissonance was at play.

[4] The veracity of the claim that Apple products are intuitive or simple to use because of a users previous use of other tablets is a debatable and dare I say contentious subject!

The final contributing practitioner believed it was not a ‘key aspect’ of the message design process.

Cognitive dissonance is a well-known term in general parlance, and thus all the practitioners when asked stated that they had heard of cognitive dissonance, only a few knew precisely what it meant, most had a vague inclination of what it meant. Often practitioners with extended experience or public relations-based qualifications were speaking about cognitive dissonance before the researcher asked, though not necessarily using the phrase ‘cognitive dissonance’.

Constructivism

Aside from two practitioners working at the local authority level within the public sector, almost all practitioners used language consistent with constructivism, phrases such as ‘world-view’, ‘perceptions’, ‘cognitions’, ‘relative’, ‘experiential’ etc; they did not necessarily do so using the theoretical language, though some did, nor did they do so as a consistent basis of their thinking.

Nudge Theory

We have already noted in our discussion on cognitive dissonance, a practitioner’s use of nudge theory, the more desirable option for the audience was to not have their own child smoking, that this was more desirable than their choice to smoke in children’s play parks. One practitioner also felt that nudge theory was something they used, automatically:

> *“I really don’t think there is that much of a distinction between the two. Once you’ve been working in PR a long-time you don’t kind of think I’m going to use nudge theory for this, you’re ingrained, you’ve used nudge theory so much that you just do it.”*

Other interviewees felt that nudge theory was important yet did not particularly elaborate on their own usage of the theory. The sense of it being an unconsciously used theory, one practitioner stated that *"It's in the back of your mind, so you're using it, but you just don't think of it."*, whilst another practitioner said, of all theories, but within the context of nudge theory that:

> *"For me coming from a non-academic background, originally, and entering into the academia, I didn't know any of the names, or thought I was using any theories, then, during the course I realised 'hey I've done this', it was great, it gave a solid grounding for the reasons I was already doing this stuff, but also it confirmed to me, despite doing this for so many years, that I actually knew what I was talking about, that I was actually good at it."*

Another practitioner stated that nudge theory was *"A softer touch approach* [which] *is used for certain campaigns"*, whilst a further practitioner said *"I wouldn't call what we do nudge theory, but occasionally we probably do use it, but most of the time we don't, no."*

Two practitioner's stated that it wasn't particularly helpful to their particular work, but they did have colleagues who used it for more specific campaigns.

Whilst one practitioner's stated that *"We're trying to do it all the time"* with regards to nudge theory, and a second practitioner concurred saying "*We try and gently nudge people for our clients, but it is not always possible, sometimes a campaign requires a more direct approach.*"

Another practitioner stated that "*Most of the time my communications is B2B or B2C, and therefore I'm not trying to change behaviour*", whilst another said: *"When working at the Council or the NHS, I did"* and gave the example of when tackling littering the campaign opted to focus on 'community pride' rather than a 'don't litter' campaign. Focusing on taking pride in the local community, rather than in the use of negative-language ‘don’t do this’ was far more effective.

One practitioner noted how often they would use a nudge approach when trying to get a ‘ranking agency’ to rank the organisation higher, usually in a two-fold manner. Firstly by multiple meetings with the agency to promote the product, business, inventors and founders, and then through the use of mass-media, influential bloggers, publications and social media, that the agency staff would read. They would get the publications (newspaper, magazines etc), bloggers and social media to use ‘their language’ – as a psychological tool to nudge the agency to rank the technology business higher.

A final practitioner described how they would use a ‘dropping stones in a pond approach’ a little at a time, they would create a ‘road map’ of when to release information, and they would work on consistent language and make sure they highlighted the product or organisations ‘hill’ or key element that makes them unique from the competition. In working to have the media use their language too in hopes would ‘disposition’ the opposition from the media discourse.

Every single one of the practitioner’s interviewed had heard of ‘nudge theory’ and had used or knew other practitioners who did use it frequently. To some it was an important part of their work, to others they did not use it often. Nudge theory was often used as a more gentle approach to difficult topics, and in specific campaigns, and thus was not widely used where social behaviour was not the focus of the campaign. The comments above, however, reflect those given after the definition, as those who did reference nudge theory, did so without naming it, and there comments prior to naming it are very few, comments such as “gentle prompts to get someone to change their behaviour” (around four practitioners used phrases like this).

Relevance Theory

Relevance

Messaging that is relevant to the audience/public or stakeholder was considered important (as the basic meaning of relevance) to almost all of our practitioners (see table below). One practitioner said: ““*How interested is your audience? Then you need to sensibly target the audience most interested”.* Whilst another practitioner stated: *“You have to consider where your audience is coming from, the current thinking, and what the best way of tapping into that thinking* is.”

Relevance theory, although a new one in terms of terminology to all the practitioners, was important to all the practitioners. One practitioner noted that the type of relevance was “*What’s in it for me? – Most people respond, Grand Visions – only some people will respond.”* Essentially conveying that whilst grand visions may be relevant, but what is in it for me is more relevant. Another practitioner stated that “*Action orientated messages, people are busy, there are lots of messages out there, you need to target the audience*.” This was one of the reasons relevance was important, you have to encourage your audience to listen, and an action orientated [relevant] message was the way to break through the busy-ness and the noise. Practitioners often referred to the audience relevance of a message “*How it* [the messages] *benefits the audience*”; *“Yes relevance, how the audience might read it, we have to think about it all the time, how relevant is our message is to our audience.”*; “*Does the audience care”*; regardless of if that was a member of the public, or “*The person who signs the check*” (for business-to-business communications). One practitioner suggested it's about "*Targeting people already interested or locally based*", another practitioner simply responded that: "*Yes definitely"* when asked if they used relevance theory.

One described their three principles as including a litmus test of relevance. The first: understanding - is our language the same, do we comprehend and understand one another, are we on the same page, with both stakeholders and audience. Secondly - does the language we use conjure the same meaning and emotions for all of us, does it tell the story effectively? Thirdly do you care? "*Audience Empathy*" was important to this practitioner who felt that only then could we consider our communications effective and also relevant to the audience.

Another spoke how in the case of start-up technology business in Silicon Valley, where most of their clients were, that an example of relevance was the university education of the company founders. Whilst European company founders would begin a presentation about where they went to university-college, the American audience would not care – the focus was on the product of the company not the founder's education. This practitioner described that they would work to remove such information from presentations, as it wasn't relevant to the American audience. The assumption was that the product was important and worked – and there was a preference for discussing the product not for knowing how intelligent the inventors of the product or founders of the company where.

Further to this, positivity in messaging, was considered important to the vast majority of the practitioners, when we were discussing relevance theory, two examples being:

> *"Giving a reason and a positive message, underlining good behaviours is crucial, to changing behaviour."*

and

> *"People are influenced by positive messages, that tackle the issues from a different perspective, take the hotel towel example, people are more likely to re-use a towel if the message is '90% of people reuse their towel" as opposed to '10% of people drop their towel on the floor, don't be one of them'."*

Further to this, the practitioners generally confirmed that by communicating *we imply* relevance; by choosing to listen, audiences *infer* that there is a relevance in the message to them.

Inference and Metaphor

Inference and Metaphor was a large part of the discussions with the practitioners interviewed. Sometimes they spoke about it being a thought process, "*Absolutely, you've got to think about the implications, the positive advantages, the knock-on effects.*", but they would also talk about their use of it in practice, *"Yes we do use implications, metaphors, but not necessarily as much as we could do."*. Another offered a 'word of warning', "*Implications and metaphors can be a useful tool, but they're not isolated, we have to be careful, we have to pick the campaigns we use them in.*" Whilst some felt that inference and metaphors were becoming more important in public relations, *"With the granularity of campaigns – where messages are now specific to individuals, I think it's important to be more specific, to use language, inferences, metaphors and tools your specific audience uses, but obviously you have to be careful*".

Some spoke of the 'fickleness' of an audience, *"There is a fluidity in our communications, on an individual level, one moment a message using metaphor or implying something may be helpful, may even be understood and appreciated, but the next week, that same person might not react the same way. Timing is* *important.”.* One practitioner was not a fan, saying, “*Plain English* [is used] *as metaphors and implications are not practical in a local authority.*”.

Some other practitioners concurred; “*Our communications have to be simple, or simplistic, as complexity is a luxury.”*; “*Inference and metaphor is often deliberately avoided”* – who cited their example of the Chinese clock/watch; and another practitioner said “*Working across international markets means effectively translating different metaphors or implications into different cultural context almost impossible, for that reason we just don’t do it*” – who spoke about the unnecessary difficulty it would add to the messaging designing process. Still one practitioner was more in favour of inference and metaphor, at least when its noticed, *“If we notice a message could be perceived in another way* [that we intended] *we do change the message around.”*. But also noted that it wasn’t something they thought about much. Another practitioner’s answer was along the same lines as this practitioner, adding that, *“We do not actively think about this, but obviously, if we see something we will change it, when it might result in negative interpretations*.”.

One practitioner sounded a little more contradictory, saying that, *“We do think about it a lot, though we do like to use specifics because of the nature of our audience*.”. This practitioner is not actually contradicting themselves, as thinking about the implications we use, whilst attempting to use precise and specific language, is a crucial element of both relevance theory and the effective use of implication and metaphor.

Another practitioner gave a different take on the use of metaphor and implication, saying that, “*High end brands prefer to use a journey, tell a story in their communications, which uses implication and metaphor*, *but cheaper or mass-market* *brands, ones who aren't focused on luxury, tend to prefer the direct, straight-to-the-point messaging*.".

One practitioner that in 1-2-1 and group settings for verbal communication, they would use metaphors and inference. However, when using written or mass-communication methods they would avoid it, to prevent ambiguity. The final contributing practitioner described their use of metaphors and inferences in terms of 'only when it communicates empathetically and grants further understanding'.

Relevance theory was a new-one on all the practitioners interviewed, when asked if they had heard of it, all admitted they hadn't, therefore they were all given the same explanation of what it was and meant.

The Use of Theories

The use of academic theories in public relations practice, according to the practitioners interviewed, was almost always unconscious.

The second contributing practitioner stated that, *"I wouldn't stop and say to my team, 'I'm using this particular theory in this campaign, but it's understood that that's what is happening."*

And the seventh contributing practitioner said, *"It's in the back of your mind, so you're using them, but you just don't think of them."*. The vast majority of practitioners concurred with this viewpoint. The first practitioner, provided a particularly helpful story to explain this, surrounding the recipe for Nigella Lawson's Guinness Chocolate Cake. They had made the cake hundreds of times, initially using the recipe, but now they do not read or think about the recipe specifically, because they know how to make the cake. The use of theories in public relations and communications was simply an unconscious act according to all the practitioners. The sixth contributing practitioner noted how they run through a SWAT analysis without writing anything down or thinking about it too much. To all the practitioners who are to a lesser or greater extent using theories in practice, it was done unconsciously, as “second nature”. The research’s first contributing practitioner suggested that they switch between the conscious and unconscious usage of theory, the divide was not that strong, as it was the natural way. The tenth practioners noted that the use of theories can, however, be quite practical, the way to lay-out a document; media/press release; and the structuring of a report and the listing of important information. They also note that the theory that was eminently practical and still consciously required in the more general public relations practice, and could be relevant to message design, in that it is part of the context of which messages are transmitted in. Another who had an undergraduate degree in journalism and politics but without qualifications in public relations, stated quite emphatically that the one reason for their interest in taking part in the research was because they didn’t know any theories and were pleased when I recommended Smith’s book to them on campaign planning. Whilst they did not know the names of any theories, they alongside the majority of practitioners did use some language from theories in their practice of public relations campaign planning and message design.

Conclusion

Constructivist thinking is seen in all of those who were interviewed, aside from the more functionalist approaches taken by two of the practitioner. This does not mean that those interviewed are ‘constructivists’ but that they do think, at times, in terms of world-views, frames-of-reference and certainly in cognitive dissonance.

The use of cognitive dissonance was more-often than not tied to nudge theory, or at least in terms of tackling difficult subjects. The fact that the majority of the practitioners have used or do use nudge theory, also implies that they may use cognitive dissonance. Regarding relevance theory, the majority of the practitioners felt the relevance of the message to their audience was important, but regarding metaphor and inference they were a little more divided. This depended specifically on their audience, their market (European, Asia-Pacific, Americas, International etc), though clarity of message seemed important. There were various little stories during the interviews given by practitioners surrounding miscommunications, examples similar to the diamond example (for relevance theory) as well as numerous examples for nudge theory (and cognitive dissonance). Nudge theory provided the majority of the examples, and from this it may appear that nudge theory is the more popular theory. Relevance itself, the basic definition of needing to infer relevance in the message for the audience to imply relevance was crucial to all but two of the practitioners. It is difficult to discuss in depth any 'larger scopes' of applicability out-with the experiences of the practitioners; the research has only found that these practitioners do use some theories albeit unconsciously. It does not manage to explore anything deeper than that, it cannot be expanded to prove or disprove if all practitioners use these theories unconsciously in their work as public relations and communications practitioners. It can be said, however, that public relations practitioners, may use theories unconsciously in practice, and that those with public relations academic qualifications are *more* likely to use, know, and implement theories in public relations, but that is not a particularly strong standing point. Because one practitioners with extensive experience over academia knew and used theories, again unconsciously, whilst some practitioners with limited experience (less than 10 years) but having graduated an academic degree in public relations (in the last 10 years) aren't using theories in their day to day work. There are no hard-and-fast rules, except that one, and that some theories and approaches are appropriate at certain times, and others are appropriate at other times. But the one over-riding message from practitioners was that using positive messages is more effective than using 'don't' or restrictive-negative messages, which possibly means that people like to be told what they can do, and not what they can't do, as well as people flocking together, 'like sheep'.

All the practitioners who had formal study in public relations felt that their understanding of theories informed their practice and/or was an unconscious element of their work, however, those who had been practitioners prior to formal studied spoke about how the formal study confirmed their 'natural thinking' and those without formal training were curious about formal public relations training.

The final chapter of this research will address these conclusions, their importance, the strengths and weakness of the research and areas of further research.

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Chapter Four: 4142 words

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Chapter Five: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter will look at the implications of these findings, the strengths and weaknesses of the research, further possible research avenues and then conclude some final thoughts.

Implications of Results

In as much as the results tell us that these theories are or were not in conscious use by practitioners, and that the majority of previous study has led to practitioners using theory unconsciously. Even in the case of those without formal education, the use of theory is possibly *natural* or possibly *instinctive*, possibly because of experience, though precision is impossible here, as it requires deeper, longer interviewees with the audience. Theory may have a larger part to play in public relations practice, in the years to come, but perhaps the language of public relations academia needs to adapt to the language of public relations and communications practice.

The question needs to be asked, because whilst interviewing people who had studied public relations to the master's degree level, they were insistent that the phrase 'publics' was rarely used, and that 'stakeholders' was primarily used for those with an internal involvement in the organisation (such as financial investment; other business'; or internal staff). Whilst for the wider public and for those same stakeholders, 'audience' tended to be used to describe who the messages would be targeted towards. This is but one example; the language of academia may not immediately be penetrable to the practitioner.

Though one practitioner told the researcher that "*audience's don't like to the feel dumb*" and that "*big words or talking down do that*" – this is a general point of human communication. the Practitioner also noted that words with more than 7 letters tend to confuse or make people feel stupid. This is something academia should, perhaps, avoid – practitioners haven't necessarily got formal training, and they still need to be able to read quickly and understand deeply the literature and to inform practice.

That same practitioner was pleased with a book recommendation (R. D. Smith, 2013) which the researcher felt was a little more easy to follow (layout, style, language usage etc). Despite the practitioner being very intelligent, it helps to have complex topics explained in simple language. Despite the fact that the majority of practitioners were highly educated, and many with public relations degrees, it is surprising that the conscious use of theory, or the naming of them, was not so common.

As one practitioner stated:

> *"When I first finished the degree, I could tell you all about the theories and their names, and could spot them being used, but after years of being in practice and not studying them constantly, they no longer come so quickly to mind, its more just the concepts."*

This suggests that concepts endure whilst names of theories do not, and that practice, as one participant told me "*just doesn't give you time to think so deeply, you have to react, or you have to design or plan so quickly, the turn-around time just doesn't allow the kind of depth of thinking theories seem to ask for*."

A second practitioner highlighted that they did not have time and were too busy to dive deeply into the thinking about the theories behind the designing of messages, they just had to get the messages out there. This suggestes that public relations practitioners may have to meet tight deadlines, which may hinder in-depth planning. Another practitioner explained that they did not have time to do research or 'dive into data'.

They were quite content with the amount of data they were able to use, and generally they didn't need to go into the minute details of an audience-segment. This is important; if they cannot fully research the audience, practitioners may rely on understanding themselves (or their environments) more than they do in-depth audience analysis.

Another important point to highlight is that whilst many of the practitioners were highly educated, comparatively few mentioned terms reminiscent of any of the theories discussed unprompted. The fact that the rest required prompting is also important to note. This may imply that public relations practice and academia are still far apart from one another, and that practitioners are 'getting on and doing the job' rather than exploring how or why they do things the way they do them.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Research

The time period; number of participants in the research; the length of interviews; and the number of topics to cover are all significant issues with the research. The number of topics to cover exceeded expectations, whereas the time period; number of participants; and the length of interviews were all lacking.

The strength of the research is not so much in its findings as in its areas of theory, the vast scope of communication theories which underpin message design cover. There was limited research about specific 'message design' theories, because there is limited published material on the subject. Communication theories more widely are vast, and seemingly ironically it is Sperber and Wilson's theory which claims there can be no over-arching general theory of communication (2004, pp. 1–3). This research has actually confirmed that, in that none of the theories discussed in totality are actually used by all practitioners interviewed. Where practitioners do one or more of the theories discussed, they don't necessarily use them all the time.

Whilst the interview technique (semi-structured) was both a strength for dialogue, discussion and exploration, it is also a weakness. This is due to the limited time of the interviews (on average one and a half hours, some exceeded two hours); the topics to cover; and the fact there wasn't a rigid 'question sheet' actually prevented the ability to question scientifically enough for the researcher's satisfaction. Some interviews lost focus at points because we explored concepts that practitioners brought up. The inability to generalise these results was also a weakness of the research. A quantitative follow up survey sent to a larger sample of practitioners, with questions based on the initial research, may produce a more varied response that was quantitative, and measurable.

Further Research

Each area of this research focus could be an area of specific more narrow research, and its use by public relations practitioners is of paramount important to understanding the link between academia and practice. Research that could also be done, is to trace the influence of constructivism in public relations literature. Further research could also explore the possible ways relevance theory or even nudge theory is used in public relations literature. Further sub-areas within relevance theory could also be researched to see if they too are compatible with public relations, and if they could be implemented in practice.

Final Thoughts

There is little to say beyond that which has been said, specifically about the research findings. I would highlight the key points: relevance theory; nudge theory; cognitive dissonance; constructivist language and conceptual frameworks; implication and metaphor are all used in public relations practice, but their use is limited to the areas where they are most effective. They are also not used in isolation, nor are they used as a final word, but rather as parts of a collective, unconscious grounded in experience, rather than in literature, approach of the practitioner.

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Chapter Five: 1205 words

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Reference List: 672 words

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Appendix I: Interviewees

Interviewees

During this appendix, interviewees (for the purposes of anonymity) will be referenced to according to the table (figure 1). The table lists, in the first column, their 'ID', followed by a brief description column. The '#' column represents how many years they have worked in public relations.

Figure 1

	Description	**#**
A	Public Sector, Regional Government, Director of Communications	5
B	Public Sector, Regional Government, Director of Communications	6
C	Private Sector, PR Consultancy to Public & Private Sector organisations, Chief Executive Officer	33
D	Private Sector, PR Consultancy to Public & Private Sector organisations, Chief Executive Officer	35
E	Public Sector, Local Government, Senior Manager	3
F	Public Sector, Local Government, Senior Manager	2
G	Private Sector, Technology Fortune 500 Companies, International, Consultant	11
H	Private Sector, Science & Technology Fortune 500 Companies, International, Consultant	12
I	Private Sector, PR Consultancy to Private Business, Germany, Senior Manager	1
J	Private Sector, PR Consultancy to Private Business, Germany, Senior Manager	2
K	Private Sector, UK conglomerate, Director of Communications	14
L	Private Sector, UK conglomerate, Director of Communications	16
M	Private Sector, Technology Fortune 500 Companies, Consultant – Legal Public Relations, USA Based – International	23
N	Private Sector, Science & Technology Fortune 500 Companies, Consultant – Legal Public Relations – USA Based – International	19

Interviewees Make-Up

Four of the interviewees worked exclusively in the public sector, two at the regional level, and two at the council level. The other 10 worked in the private sector, with six working in public relations consultancies - though two of these were at the CEO level and two at the Senior Management level - both pairs were in the UK, and two individuals in Germany. The final four worked in international communications, two as consultants to *Fortune 500* companies, and two at the higher level, with US *Fortune 500* company CEOs and blue-chip companies, as public relations consultants.

Whilst six of our practitioners worked in public relations consultancies at different levels, two worked across industry and sector, managing campaigns for both Public and Private Sector organisations. Two have also worked in-house at private companies, not just at public relations consultancy companies.

Of the 14 practitioners, the majority were at the senior level of management, either CEO/Communications Director etc, with just four being at a senior team member level. None of those interviewed were junior team members, and thus all had responsibility for writing campaign plans.

Years of Experience

Of the 14 practitioners, the four who worked in the public sector have worked in public relations and communications for less than five years; whereas out of the other 10 practitioners, two have worked in public relations for less than five years. Of the other eight, all have worked in public relations for more than a decade, with one working over 20 years. A two further interviewees' have worked in public relations for more than 30 years. The research interviewees' have a combined experience of 182 years working in public relations.

Education Level of the Interviewees

Of the 14 practitioners, there was an attempt to equalise their education level. Some are graduates of a public relations and communications master's, and others are not. One of the practitioners (Practitioner C) had founded their public relations consultancy and had worked in public relations for at least 10 years prior to undertaking the master's via distance learning. Practitioner A, a former journalist (with a degree in journalism), is currently in the process of undertaking a master's degree distance learning and is lecturing this coming semester at their local university on their public relations undergraduate degree. Practitioner E & I completed the master's on-campus in the last 10 years. Practitioner G has a several master's and Doctorates – only one of which is in communications, the rest are in numerous different sciences and technology. Whilst Practitioner B, D, F, and J have no communications degrees (though B and F hold degrees in Journalism), Practitioner D qualified at secretarial college before moving into radio production, and Practitioner J holds an undergraduate in English literature. Practitioner H holds one undergraduate degree in communications which they undertook after their doctorate in a science. Regarding Practitioner K & L, both come from radio journalism backgrounds, though Practitioner K was also involved in major online news services, having studied communications and Spanish at university. Practitioner L from Broadcast Radio Journalism holds an undergraduate degree in media. Practitioner M and N holds no communications qualifications in the United States, though practitioner M has a Journalism and Politics undergraduate, and practitioner N holds a Journalism and Business bachelor degree. The intent was to gain as broad a range of educational levels (undergraduate, master's and Doctoral graduates as well as none) in public relations and communications as possible.

Interviewee	Other	Undergraduate	Masters	PhD
A		Journalism	In Progress – Public Relations	
B		Journalism		
C		None – Previous Experience	Public Relations	
D	Secretarial (College)			
E			Public Relations	
F		Journalism		
G		Science	Communications	Various Sciences and Technologies
H		Communications Hard Science	Science	A Hard Science
I		Business	Public Relations	
J		English Literature		
K		Communications & Spanish		
L		Media		

M		Journalism & Politics		
N		Journalism & Business		

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Appendix I: 859 words

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