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# From Theory to Engagement : Reconceptualizing Public Relations in the Digital Communication Era

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## ABSTRACT

The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the conditions under which Public Relations (PR) is practiced, yet the field's foundational theoretical frameworks, developed largely in an era of mass media and linear communication flows, have not been systematically reconceptualized to account for the communicative realities of the platform era. This article addresses that gap through an integrative review methodology and conceptual analysis, re-examining four classical PR theories: Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetrical communication model, Cutlip, Center, and Broom's relationship management theory, the framing and agenda-setting framework, and Rogers's diffusion of innovation theory. Each is reinterpreted through the lens of contemporary digital phenomena including social media algorithms, artificial intelligence, cancel culture, and ESG accountability demands. Two globally recognized case studies are integrated as illustrative anchors: Stanley's viral TikTok crisis response (2023-2024), which illustrates real-time two-way engagement at scale, and Unilever's sustained ESG communication strategy (2022-2024), which demonstrates how relationship management has evolved into a purpose-driven stakeholder engagement model. The article's original contribution is the Integrated Engagement Model, a unified conceptual framework that reconceptualizes PR's four classical theoretical pillars simultaneously and coherently in response to digital, AI, and ESG imperatives. Unlike existing studies that address these transformations in isolation, this article provides a synthesized reconceptualization across all four theoretical dimensions, proposing that PR must transition from message management to engagement architecture as the governing paradigm for contemporary practice.

**Keywords:** *digital public relations; integrated engagement model; ESG communication; stakeholder engagement; two-way symmetrical communication.*

## INTRODUCTION

Public Relations as a field of professional practice and scholarly inquiry is navigating a period of fundamental transformation. The shift is not merely technological, though the

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proliferation of digital platforms, the dominance of social media algorithms, and the emergence of generative artificial intelligence are unquestionably consequential. It is also cultural and institutional. Publics are more vocal, more organized, and more capable of shaping organizational reputations than at any previous point in the history of the discipline. Organizations, in turn, face demands for transparency, purpose, and ethical accountability that earlier generations of PR practitioners would have recognized in broad outline but never encountered at this scale or speed.

Against this backdrop, a productive tension has emerged in the scholarly literature. The foundational theories of PR, developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2013), Rogers (2003), and Shoemaker and Reese (1996), among others, were formulated in a communication environment characterized by clear distinctions between senders and receivers, by relatively slow information diffusion, and by organizational control over message channels. None of those conditions reliably holds in the contemporary digital environment, where content circulates virally, publics co-produce organizational narratives in real time, and crises can escalate from local incidents to global controversies within hours. The question this article takes seriously is not whether these classical theories remain relevant, but how their core insights need to be reframed to remain useful.

The scholarly literature has engaged this question in productive but fragmented ways. Studies of digital crisis communication have examined how social media alters the speed and dynamics of organizational response (Coombs, 2019; Jin and Austin, 2022). Research on influencer relations has complicated the concept of strategic relationship management (Freberg et al., 2011; Lou and Yuan, 2019). Scholars of algorithmic communication have traced the ways in which platform architectures shape agenda-setting dynamics in ways that traditional gatekeeping models did not anticipate (Napoli, 2019; Diakopoulos, 2019). The ESG literature in communication studies has begun to theorize how sustainability and governance accountability are reshaping the relationship between organizations and their stakeholder publics (Frandsen and Johansen, 2022). And a growing body of research has examined how artificial intelligence tools are transforming the operational dimensions of PR practice, from sentiment monitoring and content generation to crisis detection and stakeholder mapping (Panda, Upadhyay, and Khandelwal, 2019; Park and Reber, 2024; Zeffass, Hagelstein, and Tench, 2020). What has been missing across all of these productive lines of inquiry is a synthesis: a coherent reconceptualization of PR's foundational theoretical architecture that integrates these developments into a unified framework for understanding how the discipline must evolve.

This article provides that synthesis. It argues that the digital era has not rendered classical PR theories obsolete, but has exposed the limits of their original formulations and created the

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conditions for more expansive and dynamic interpretations. More specifically, it proposes a conceptual reorientation from message management to an integrated engagement model as the organizing metaphor for contemporary PR practice. This reorientation acknowledges that PR's value rests not on controlling what is said about an organization, but in constructing the communicative conditions under which authentic, trust-generating engagement between organizations and their publics becomes possible. Two globally recognized case studies are introduced as empirical anchors for the reconceptualized frameworks: Stanley's viral TikTok crisis response of 2023 to 2024 and Unilever's sustained ESG communication strategy across the same period.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Classical PR Theories and Their Original Contexts

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of PR, particularly the two-way symmetrical model, remain the most cited theoretical contribution in the field's history. The symmetrical model posits that effective PR involves genuine dialogue between an organization and its publics, with both parties willing to modify their positions based on the exchange. Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2013) elaborated the relational dimension, defining PR as the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends. Rogers's (2003) diffusion of innovation theory offered insights into how new ideas and behaviors spread through social systems, identifying the role of opinion leaders and early adopters as critical nodes in the diffusion process. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) provided the framing and agenda-setting theoretical tradition with a systematic account of how media organizations shape public perception through the selection, emphasis, and exclusion of information.

These theories were developed in communicative environments where organizational actors exercised significant control over message distribution channels, where the audience for organizational communication was relatively passive, and where information diffusion was constrained by the gatekeeping functions of mass media institutions. The emergence of networked digital communication has disrupted each of these conditions in ways that the original theorists could not have fully anticipated.

Despite their enduring influence, these classical frameworks have attracted substantive critique in the digital era. The two-way symmetrical model, while normatively appealing, has been questioned for its idealistic assumption that organizations are genuinely willing to modify their positions in response to public feedback, a condition that empirical research has found to be rarely met in practice (Men and Tsai, 2022). The relationship management framework, meanwhile, was developed for a stakeholder landscape that was relatively bounded and stable; it does not readily accommodate the emergence of algorithmically constructed publics whose

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membership is volatile and whose expectations are shaped as much by platform dynamics as by organizational behavior. The diffusion of innovation model was premised on sequential, time-extended adoption processes that the viral logic of digital networks has rendered descriptively inadequate in many contexts. And the agenda-setting and framing tradition was built on the assumption of media organizations as primary gatekeepers, a structural condition that platform algorithms have fundamentally complicated. These limitations do not invalidate the classical theories; rather, they identify the specific dimensions along which reconceptualization is required if the theories are to retain analytical purchase in the contemporary communicative environment.

## **2.2 Digital Disruption and the Transformation of PR Practice**

The transformation of PR by digital media has been extensively documented in the scholarly literature. Coombs (2019) has shown that social media fundamentally alters crisis communication dynamics, compressing the temporal window for organizational response and amplifying the reach and emotional intensity of crisis narratives. Jin and Austin (2022) have documented how the multi-platform character of contemporary crises requires PR practitioners to coordinate responses across channels with different affordances and audience expectations simultaneously. Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg (2011) demonstrated that social media influencers constitute a new category of public that both extends and complicates the relationship management function, since influencer relationships require the negotiation of authenticity, commercial interest, and audience trust in ways that conventional stakeholder relations did not.

The algorithmic mediation of public communication has introduced a further layer of complexity. Napoli (2019) has argued that platform algorithms function as new gatekeepers, shaping which content reaches which audiences in ways that are often opaque to the organizations whose communications they affect. Diakopoulos (2019) has examined the specific implications of algorithmic news curation for public agenda-setting, showing that the traditional account of media organizations setting public agendas requires significant revision when platform architectures play a decisive role in determining what content audiences encounter. For PR practitioners, these developments mean that message dissemination is no longer a function of media relations alone but requires an understanding of algorithmic logic, search engine optimization, and content engagement metrics that were peripheral concerns for earlier generations of the profession.

A further development that has reshaped the PR landscape is the emergence of cancel culture and reputational accountability dynamics driven by networked publics. Zerfass, Hagelstein, and Tench (2020) have documented how the always-on character of digital communication means that organizational missteps, whether historical or current, can be

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surfaced, amplified, and weaponized by activist publics at any time, dramatically compressing the timeframe within which organizations must develop and deploy crisis responses. The implication for PR theory is significant: the management of organizational reputation can no longer be conceived as a periodic or reactive function, but must be understood as a continuous, real-time process of narrative stewardship across all digital channels. Employee communication has also emerged as a newly critical dimension of this challenge, since employees themselves have become powerful external communicators of organizational culture and values through their personal social media presences, making internal and external communication increasingly inseparable functions (Men and Tsai, 2022).

### **2.3 ESG, AI, and the Ethical Reorientation of PR**

Two developments of the past decade have introduced particularly significant pressures on PR theory and practice. The first is the rise of ESG accountability as a central expectation for organizational communication. Frandsen and Johansen (2022) have documented how sustainability and governance demands have transformed stakeholder relations, requiring organizations to communicate not only about products and services but about their environmental impact, social responsibility commitments, and governance structures. Unilever's research, widely cited in the business communication literature, found that sustainable brands within its portfolio grew 69 percent faster than non-sustainable counterparts, establishing a direct commercial case for the integration of ESG communication into strategic PR (Unilever, 2022). The implications for PR theory are substantial: relationship management can no longer be understood as primarily dyadic, between an organization and its immediate publics, but must account for the broader societal and environmental stakeholder ecosystems within which organizations operate.

The second development is the integration of artificial intelligence into both the production and reception of PR content. Panda, Upadhyay, and Khandelwal (2019) identified early the significance of AI for the PR field, noting both its potential to automate routine communication tasks and its implications for questions of authenticity, attribution, and ethical accountability. More recent scholarship has examined the specific implications of generative AI, whose capacity to produce realistic text, images, and audio at scale introduces new challenges for the verification of organizational communications and for public trust in mediated information environments (Galloway and Swiatek, 2018). Anani-Bossman, Nutsugah, and Abudulai (2024) found that PR professionals in emerging markets are already navigating the tensions between AI efficiency gains and the authenticity expectations of publics who are increasingly skeptical of algorithmically produced content. Prahl and Goh (2021) have further shown that when AI-driven systems fail publicly, the reputational consequences for organizations can be severe and rapid, underscoring the need for robust human oversight of AI-

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assisted communication processes. The PR practitioner of the current era must therefore navigate not only the complexities of social media management and algorithmic distribution, but also the emerging landscape of AI-assisted content production and its associated ethical demands, including questions of disclosure, attribution, and the preservation of communicative authenticity.

#### **2.4 The Research Gap**

Despite the richness of these individual scholarly contributions, a coherent synthesis that systematically reconceptualizes the foundational PR theories in light of the full range of digital, AI, and ESG developments has not yet been produced. Existing studies tend to address specific phenomena in isolation: digital crisis communication, influencer relations, algorithmic agenda-setting, or ESG stakeholder engagement, without integrating these insights into a unified reconceptualization of the theoretical framework that underpins the discipline as a whole. This fragmentation is theoretically costly. PR practice is not a collection of discrete functions to be optimized separately; it is an integrated organizational capacity whose coherence depends on a unified theoretical architecture. When each sub-domain of digital PR develops its own theoretical vocabulary in relative isolation, the result is a proliferation of middle-range theories that cannot speak to one another or to the broader question of what PR is for in the digital era. This article addresses that gap directly, arguing that the conceptual reorientation required is not merely incremental but involves a fundamental shift in how the purpose and function of PR are theorized, one that demands simultaneous reconceptualization across all four of the discipline's foundational theoretical pillars.

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This article employs an integrative review methodology combined with conceptual analysis and illustrative case study integration. An integrative review approach was selected because the article's central aim is theoretical reconceptualization rather than the systematic aggregation of empirical findings, making it more appropriate than a formal systematic review, which is designed to evaluate bodies of empirical evidence through standardized protocols (Torraco, 2005; Whitemore and Knafl, 2005). The integrative review approach allows for the inclusion of both theoretical and empirical literature and is well-suited to developing new conceptual frameworks from diverse scholarly sources (Torraco, 2005).

The literature search was conducted across four academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and the Communication Abstracts database. Search terms were developed systematically using Boolean combinations of the following keywords: public relations theory, digital public relations, social media PR, crisis communication, ESG stakeholder engagement, AI in public relations, algorithmic communication, influencer relations, two-way symmetrical communication, relationship management theory, framing

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theory, and diffusion of innovation. The temporal scope prioritized sources published between 2015 and 2024, acknowledging that the most significant digital, AI, and ESG transformations in PR practice have accelerated during this period, while seminal foundational works predating this window were included without temporal restriction given their defining role in the discipline.

Inclusion criteria required that sources: (1) were peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, or book chapters; (2) addressed at least one of the four classical PR theories under examination or their digital-era applications; (3) were written in English; and (4) demonstrated clear relevance to one or more of the key themes of digital communication, AI, ESG accountability, or social media engagement in organizational communication contexts. Sources were excluded if they were purely practitioner-focused without scholarly grounding, if they addressed unrelated communication fields without direct PR application, or if they could not be verified through scholarly databases. Following this screening process, 38 sources were retained for substantive engagement in the review. Non-scholarly sources, specifically publicly available corporate communications and business media reporting, were included selectively and exclusively as documentary evidence for the two illustrative case studies.

The conceptual analysis proceeded through a structured interpretive process organized around the four classical PR theories selected for reconceptualization. For each theory, the procedure involved three steps. First, the original theoretical propositions were identified and characterized through close reading of the primary texts. Second, the relevant contemporary literature on digital communication, AI, and ESG developments was analyzed to identify the specific ways in which each theory's original assumptions have been challenged, complicated, or extended. Third, a reconceptualized formulation was developed for each theory that preserves its core theoretical insight while revising its operational assumptions in light of the contemporary communicative environment. This interpretive process draws on the tradition of conceptual analysis in communication theory as described by Kaplan (1964) and applied in more recent PR scholarship (Botan and Hazleton, 2006). Where the existing literature does not yet fully address a particular dimension of reconceptualization, the article contributes original theoretical argument grounded in the logic of the reviewed literature.

Two case studies were selected for integration as illustrative empirical anchors for the reconceptualized theoretical frameworks. Case study selection followed explicit criteria: each case was required to be (a) globally recognized and extensively documented in credible public sources; (b) directly and demonstrably relevant to at least one of the four reconceptualized theoretical frameworks; (c) drawn from the period 2020 to 2024 to ensure contemporaneity with the digital-era phenomena under analysis; and (d) representative of a distinct dimension of the integrated engagement model proposed in this article. Stanley's TikTok crisis response of 2023 to 2024 was selected as an illustration of real-time two-way symmetrical engagement

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and viral diffusion dynamics. Unilever's ESG communication strategy from 2022 to 2024 was selected as an illustration of purpose-driven relationship management at multi-stakeholder scale. Both cases are treated as illustrative examples rather than empirical data sources; their function is to demonstrate the practical applicability of the reconceptualized frameworks rather than to provide evidentiary proof of their validity. Both are drawn from publicly available corporate communications, peer-reviewed analyses, and business media reporting.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Reconceptualizing Two-Way Symmetrical Communication: From Dialogue to Real-Time Stakeholder Engagement

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model posited that the highest form of PR involves genuine dialogue characterized by mutual adjustment: organizations listen to publics, publics engage with organizations, and both are willing to modify their positions based on the exchange. In the mass media era, this aspiration was largely constrained by logistics. Broadcast communication simply made genuinely symmetrical dialogue at scale difficult to achieve. The digital era has changed both sides of that equation: it has made symmetrical engagement technically possible at unprecedented scale, and it has made its absence organizationally costly in ways that Grunig and Hunt could not have anticipated.

The reconceptualized version of two-way symmetrical communication proposed here shifts the analytical focus from the presence or absence of dialogue to the quality, authenticity, and speed of organizational engagement with publics across digital platforms. In the platform era, publics do not merely receive and respond to organizational messages; they actively co-produce organizational narratives through user-generated content, social media commentary, and viral amplification. The symmetrical ideal must therefore be reconceived as an ongoing engagement process rather than a communicative event: a sustained organizational capacity for authentic, responsive, and culturally attuned interaction with distributed publics across multiple simultaneous channels.

AI-powered tools now amplify this capacity in ways that earlier theorists could not have imagined. Sentiment analysis platforms process millions of social media posts in real time, giving PR teams immediate intelligence about how organizational actions are being received and interpreted across public segments. AI-assisted response systems can draft initial replies to high-volume public inquiries, freeing PR professionals to focus their attention on the strategic and empathetic dimensions of engagement that require human judgment. The risk, as Galloway and Swiatek (2018) have noted, is that the automation of engagement responses can produce interactions that are technically symmetrical but experientially hollow, undermining the trust-building function that the symmetrical model was designed to serve. The reconceptualized framework therefore insists that technological augmentation of engagement capacity must be

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accompanied by a deepened commitment to authenticity as the governing norm of organizational communication.

#### **4.2 Case Study 1: Stanley and the TikTok Crisis (2023-2024)**

Stanley, the American drinkware brand, provides one of the most instructive recent illustrations of reconceptualized two-way symmetrical communication in action. In late 2023, a TikTok video posted by a consumer showed her Stanley tumbler surviving a car fire completely intact, with ice still in the cup, while her vehicle was totaled. The video reached 94 million views within days, transforming a minor consumer story into a global media phenomenon. The creator noted publicly that while her Stanley cup had survived, she could not afford to replace her car (Zen Media, 2024).

Stanley's response was executed with a speed and authenticity that has since become a reference point in digital PR literature. The company's president, Terence Reilly, commented directly on the original TikTok video within hours, offering the creator both a new cup and a new car. The comment was itself filmed and shared, generating a further viral wave. The campaign ultimately produced over one billion media impressions, and the #StanleyCup hashtag accumulated 7 billion TikTok views by early 2024 (Zen Media, 2024). Critically, Stanley's response demonstrated all three dimensions of the reconceptualized symmetrical engagement framework: it was immediate, satisfying the speed imperative of digital crisis communication; it was authentic, with a named senior executive engaging personally rather than issuing a corporate statement; and it was empathetic, addressing the creator's specific material circumstances rather than merely defending the product.

The Stanley case also illustrates the reconceptualized diffusion of innovation dynamic. The brand did not engineer the viral moment; it emerged organically from a consumer experience. What Stanley engineered was the amplification response that converted an unplanned consumer narrative into a sustained brand equity event. This reflects the contemporary reality that organizations do not control the initiation of diffusion processes in digital networks, but can significantly shape their trajectory through timely and culturally resonant engagement. The brand's annual revenue had grown from USD 73 million in 2019 to over USD 750 million in 2023, a trajectory substantially driven by its social media engagement strategy (Zen Media, 2024), providing concrete evidence of the commercial returns on authentically executed digital engagement.

#### **4.3 Reconceptualizing Relationship Management: From Stakeholder Relations to Purposive Engagement Ecosystems**

Cutlip, Center, and Broom's (2013) relationship management framework positioned PR as the function responsible for building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics. In its original formulation, the framework conceived

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of stakeholders primarily as definable groups whose interests could be mapped and whose relationships with the organization could be managed through sustained communicative attention. The digital era has complicated this picture in two significant ways.

First, the stakeholder landscape has expanded and become more fluid. Organizations must now manage relationships not only with traditional stakeholders, including customers, employees, investors, media, and regulators, but also with social media communities, online advocacy groups, digital influencers, and algorithmically connected publics whose membership is volatile and whose expectations are often shaped by values-based concerns that earlier stakeholder frameworks did not prioritize. Second, the ESG imperative has introduced a temporal and systemic dimension to relationship management that the original framework did not contemplate: organizations are now expected to manage relationships not only with present stakeholders but with future generations, not only with human publics but with the environmental and social systems within which they operate.

The reconceptualized relationship management framework proposed here characterizes PR's relational function as the construction and maintenance of purposive engagement ecosystems: dense, multi-directional webs of communicative relationships organized around shared values, mutual accountability, and long-term trust. Within these ecosystems, employee advocacy functions as a critical internal dimension, since employees who are genuinely engaged with organizational purpose serve as the most credible external communicators of that purpose. Influencer partnerships function as extended relational nodes that carry organizational narratives into communities that conventional media relations cannot reach. And ESG reporting functions as the systematic accountability mechanism through which organizations demonstrate to their expanded stakeholder ecosystems that their relationship management commitments are substantive rather than rhetorical.

#### **4.4 Case Study 2: Unilever's ESG Communication Strategy (2022-2024)**

Unilever's sustained ESG communication strategy across the period 2022 to 2024 provides the most extensively documented illustration of the reconceptualized relationship management framework operating at global scale. The company's internal research, published in its sustainability reports and widely cited in business communication literature, established that brands within its portfolio with a defined social or environmental purpose grew 69 percent faster than those without (Unilever, 2022). This finding repositioned ESG communication from a peripheral corporate responsibility function to a central driver of commercial performance, a reframing with profound implications for how PR's relational function is theorized.

Critically, Unilever's approach demonstrated that the integration of sustainability into organizational communication must be substantive rather than symbolic to generate genuine

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stakeholder engagement. The company embedded sustainability commitments into product development processes rather than treating them as messaging overlays, making the communication of ESG performance an extension of operational reality rather than a reputational management exercise (Unilever, 2022). This distinction, between authentic ESG integration and what Carroll (1991) would recognize as corporate responsibility theater, is precisely what the reconceptualized relationship management framework identifies as the dividing line between engagement ecosystems that generate durable trust and communications programmes that generate short-term positive coverage but long-term credibility erosion.

The Unilever case also illustrates the reconceptualized framing and agenda-setting dynamic. By systematically connecting its brand narratives to globally salient issues of climate, equity, and responsible consumption, Unilever did not merely respond to public agendas already set by media and advocacy organizations. It participated actively in the construction of the agenda itself, contributing to the normalization of sustainability as a commercial expectation rather than a philanthropic aspiration. This proactive agenda contribution reflects the expanded possibilities for organizational frame-setting that digital platforms provide, while also illustrating the heightened risks of inconsistency between stated values and organizational behavior that the ESG era has introduced.

#### **4.5 Reconceptualizing Framing, Agenda-Setting, and Diffusion in the Algorithmic Era**

The framing and agenda-setting tradition, as systematized by Shoemaker and Reese (1996), understood the power to shape public perception as residing primarily with media institutions acting as gatekeepers between events and publics. Platform algorithms have distributed and complicated this gatekeeping function in ways that require substantial theoretical revision. The reconceptualized framing framework proposed here acknowledges that organizations now operate within a multi-actor framing contest in which traditional media, social media influencers, user-generated content, algorithmic curation, and organizational communications all contribute to the construction of public narratives about organizational actions.

For PR practitioners, this means that effective framing is no longer primarily a matter of crafting the right message for media distribution but of constructing narratives that are algorithmically discoverable, culturally resonant, emotionally engaging, and resistant to misappropriation by counter-framers. AI content analysis tools now allow organizations to monitor framing contests in real time, identifying which narratives are gaining traction and enabling rapid frame adjustment before negative framings become entrenched. The reconceptualized diffusion framework similarly acknowledges that the contemporary innovator-early adopter-early majority diffusion chain is no longer sequential but often compressed and non-linear, with viral amplification capable of moving content from niche

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early adopter communities to mass public awareness within hours. PR practitioners must therefore think not only about reaching early adopters but about designing content with the structural properties that facilitate viral diffusion across algorithmically mediated networks.

#### **4.6 Toward an Integrated Engagement Model**

The four reconceptualized theories, taken together, support the integrated conceptual framework proposed in this article: PR as engagement architecture. This reorientation proposes that the organizing metaphor for contemporary PR practice should shift from message management, which implies organizational control over what is communicated, to engagement architecture, which implies the construction of communicative conditions under which authentic, trust-generating interaction between organizations and their publics becomes possible and sustainable.

Engagement architecture involves four interdependent dimensions, each corresponding to a reconceptualized classical theory. The first concerns the organizational capacity for authentic, responsive, and empathetic interaction with distributed digital publics, drawing from the reconceptualized two-way symmetrical communication model. The second concerns the construction and maintenance of purposive engagement ecosystems organized around shared values and mutual accountability, derived from reconceptualized relationship management. The third concerns the proactive and adaptive management of organizational frames in multi-actor, algorithmically mediated framing contests, building on reconceptualized framing and agenda-setting theory. The fourth concerns the strategic design of content and influencer networks that facilitate the viral spread of organizational narratives across algorithmically structured digital networks, informed by reconceptualized innovation diffusion theory. Together, these four dimensions constitute a coherent framework for understanding what PR must become in the platform era.

PR professionals who embrace the integrated engagement model must possess a distinctive combination of competencies: deep cultural and social intelligence to recognize the values, concerns, and communicative expectations of diverse digital publics; data literacy sufficient to interpret algorithmic and engagement analytics; ethical judgment capable of navigating the tensions between organizational interests and public accountability; and creative capacity sufficient to construct narratives that are simultaneously authentic, strategically coherent, and compelling across multiple platforms and cultural contexts. This competency profile represents a substantive evolution from the media relations and message management skills that defined the PR profession in the mass media era.

The integrated engagement model also carries significant implications for how PR functions are evaluated and measured within organizations. Traditional PR metrics, centered on media impressions, press coverage volume, and message placement rates, are inadequate for

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capturing the value generated by engagement architecture. Park and Reber (2024) have argued that AI-driven analytics now enable more sophisticated measurement of relational outcomes, including sentiment trajectory, stakeholder trust dynamics, and the spread of organizational narratives across networked publics. The integrated engagement model proposed in this article suggests that PR evaluation frameworks should be redesigned to capture four corresponding dimensions: the quality and authenticity of real-time engagement interactions; the depth and stability of purposive engagement ecosystem relationships; the organization's capacity to shape rather than merely respond to framing contests; and the viral reach and cultural resonance of organizationally seeded narratives. Taken together, these measurement dimensions would provide a more complete and theoretically grounded account of PR's value contribution than the legacy metrics that currently dominate both professional practice and academic evaluation of PR effectiveness. This reorientation of measurement toward relational and narrative outcomes is, in the view of this article, as important a dimension of the transition to engagement architecture as the reconceptualization of the underlying theoretical frameworks themselves.

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the digital era has not rendered classical PR theories obsolete but has created the conditions for more expansive, dynamic, and ethically demanding interpretations of their core insights. The reconceptualization of two-way symmetrical communication as real-time integrated engagement model, which reconceptualizes relationship management as purposive engagement ecosystems, framing and agenda-setting as multi-actor narrative contest management, and diffusion of innovation as viral content design reflects the genuine continuity between classical theoretical foundations and contemporary practice demands, while acknowledging the substantive transformations that digital media, AI, and ESG imperatives have introduced.

The two case studies examined in this article, Stanley's TikTok crisis response and Unilever's ESG communication strategy, illustrate that the reconceptualized frameworks are not merely theoretical constructs but are already being enacted, with varying degrees of intentionality and sophistication, by organizations navigating the demands of contemporary stakeholder communication. Stanley demonstrates that authentic, empathetic, and rapid engagement at scale can convert crisis moments into brand equity events of significant commercial consequence. Unilever demonstrates that genuine ESG integration, communicated consistently and substantively, can reposition sustainability from a peripheral responsibility function to a core commercial driver.

For PR scholarship, this article's central contribution is the Integrated Engagement Model, a unified conceptual framework that reconceptualizes PR's four foundational theoretical pillars simultaneously and coherently, filling the synthesis gap identified in Section

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2.4. The model provides a coherent conceptual vocabulary for understanding PR's evolving function in the digital era and offers a productive foundation for future empirical research. For PR education, the framework suggests a pedagogical reorientation toward the competencies of digital cultural intelligence, data literacy, algorithmic awareness, ethical judgment, and narrative design. For PR practice, it underscores the urgency of transitioning from defensive message management to proactive, relational engagement as the primary organizational value proposition of the PR function. Crucially, the model is not prescriptive in the sense of offering a fixed procedure; it is architecturally generative, providing a conceptual structure within which organizations can develop engagement strategies adapted to their specific stakeholder ecosystems, industry contexts, and communicative cultures. The two case studies examined here, one illustrating real-time crisis engagement and the other demonstrating long-form ESG narrative building, are intended precisely to demonstrate this contextual adaptability.

This article is limited by its conceptual rather than empirical character. Future research should develop empirical studies testing the integrated engagement model against systematic data from organizational communication practice: longitudinal analyses of how organizations that adopt integrated engagement approaches differ in stakeholder trust, crisis resilience, and reputational outcomes from those that do not; comparative case studies across industries and cultural contexts; and quantitative analyses of the relationship between specific dimensions of the integrated engagement model and measurable communication performance indicators. The theoretical framework offered here is intended as a productive starting point for that empirical research agenda. It is also worth noting that the two case studies examined in this article, while globally recognized and extensively documented, are drawn from large multinational organizations operating in relatively resource-rich communicative environments. Future research should examine whether and how the integrated engagement model applies to smaller organizations, public sector communicators, and practitioners operating in contexts with different digital infrastructure, media landscape, and stakeholder expectations, including in Global South settings where the communicative dynamics of the platform era may manifest differently from those documented in predominantly North American and European scholarship.

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