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Communication or action? Strategies fostering ethical organizational conduct and relational outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationships between two public relations strategies, bridging and buffering, and their impact on ethical organizational conduct and relational outcomes. Bridging is a relationship-centric, action-based strategy for problem-solving while buffering is an organization-centric, messaging-based strategy for impression management. In explaining the impact of these two strategies on organizational outcomes, this study examined the role of ethical organizational conduct as a mediator between bridging, buffering, and two relational outcomes. Based on a survey of 105 organizations in Korea, a positive association between bridging strategy and ethical organizational conduct was found, along with paths to relational improvement and conflict avoidance with strategic constituencies. No association was found between buffering strategy and ethical organizational conduct.

1. Introduction

Instances of corporate malfeasance remind us of the significant role of ethics in business. As publics continue to be increasingly sensitive to organizational misconduct (e.g., [Huber, Vogel, & Meyer 2009](#)), organizations must consider corporate ethics in management decisions, particularly those affecting stakeholders (e.g., [Jones, Felps, & Bigley, 2007](#)). What specific public relations strategy would encourage ethical corporate behavior to avoid negative outcomes and foster positive ones, should be a key question of our scholarship, and one that is addressed in this research. While there is no consensus on the most desirable strategy to make businesses ethical, an organization's communicative efforts and ethics have shown to be interrelated, given that communication managers share an organization's ethical decisions with stakeholders and advise the management on such actions ([Bowen, 2004](#)).

Little is known empirically, however, about how the adoption of different strategies affects ethical conduct. In this study, we compare the impact of communication- and action-based strategies, or buffering and bridging strategies on ethical conduct to propose a normative theory for the ethical management of organizational conduct and for strategic stakeholder relations. Contingency theory scholars have suggested that organizations need to choose the "appropriate point along the continuum that best fits the current need of the organization and its publics" ([Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997](#), p. 35). However, whether adoption of certain PR strategies over others results in ethical conduct is yet to be investigated. This study aims to address the dearth of research pertaining to strategic decisions, ethical conduct, and their outcomes. By doing so, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge of public relations and organizational ethics. In the sections that follow, we situate our study in public relations literature, discuss our hypotheses and results, and advance theoretical and practical implications.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Bridging or buffering: which strategy fosters ethical organizational conduct?

An organization's strategy formulation is part of its deliberate decision-making process that affects its stakeholders (Mintzberg, 1977). Strategy can be seen as a plan, a position, or a perspective (Mintzberg, 1987). When Mintzberg's notion of strategy formulation is applied to public relations, an organization's strategy not only indicates its decision making orientation, but also its worldview of stakeholder management and communication. Clarifying what public relations strategy is and what its outcomes might be is a significant area of research (Steyn, 2003; Werder & Holtzhausen, 2009).

This study adopts Kim's (2014) notions of bridging and buffering strategy, or action-based and communication-based strategies, respectively. Although there is no denying the importance of communication, scholars have pointed out that organizational issues stem not only from what the organization has said but also from what it has done (e.g., Broom & Sha, 2013). It is therefore not enough to focus merely on organizations' communication-based strategies, but also their action-based strategies, paralleling what Kim (2014) conceptualized as buffering (communication-based) and bridging (action-based) strategies. The bridging and buffering strategies form the theoretical crux of this study.

The buffering strategy in this study is conceptualized as an organization-centric, message-focused strategy for image management. An organization adhering to the buffering strategy strives to create a positive image or impression of the organization through favorable messaging of its (even if they are problematic) behaviors among stakeholders, protecting the organization from stakeholder backlash. Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) further defined an organization's image management as "attempts to make organizations look good *regardless* of their conduct or the actual situation" (p. 72, italic emphasis added). However, because there exists a "disjunction between the firm's actual and expected actions" (Philippe & Durand, 2011; p. 973), the effect of the organization's strategic messaging efforts regarding its reputation may be limited as a result (i.e., symbolic reputation) (Kim, Bach, & Clelland, 2007). The intended beneficiary of this strategy is an organization (Laskin, 2012), and the product of public relations under this function is a symbolic relationship (Grunig, 1993).

It should be noted that the buffering strategy is different from persuasion or advocacy which still allows for ethical public relations (Porter, 2009). While persuasion or advocacy could be a professional and ethical form of organizational communication (Bivins, 1987) as far as it meets certain principles regarding discourse ethics (Burleson & Kline, 1979) and public interest (Messina, 2007), buffering is conceptualized to be unethical when an organization aims to manipulate publics' perceptions by image management while maintaining its problematic behavior (Kim, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2016).

In contrast, bridging is conceptualized as a relationship-centric, action-focused strategy for problem solving. An organization that focuses on the bridging strategy aligns corporate behaviors with key stakeholder needs or issues (Grunig, 2009; Krishna & Kim, 2016; Kim, Hung-Baesecke, Yang, & Grunig, 2013). Action-based strategies start from management's conscious efforts to assess potential consequences of its decisions, policies, or behaviors on stakeholders (Broom & Sha, 2013). A management inclined toward an action-based strategy tries to minimize negative consequences of its decisions or actions and is willing to revise its decisions or actions to address the issues of stakeholders (Broom & Sha, 2013). The intended beneficiaries of this strategy are both the organization and its stakeholders (Laskin, 2012). Philippe and Durand (2011) also found that an organization's communication efforts improve its reputation *only when* paired with its actual performance. The bridging strategy does not discount the role of messaging. However, it does re-focus the organization's priorities from being message-centric to behavior-centric and from being organization-centric to relationship-centric (Kim, 2014; Kim, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2016).

It is essential for organizations to identify effective strategies that help them be accountable, authentic, and ethical, and meet the basic goals for survival. To do so, we examine three outcomes of public relations strategy – ethical organizational conduct, conflict avoidance, and relational improvement.

2.2. Ethical organizational conduct

Arthur (1984) raised an interesting yet important question: "How does a businessman get a practical hold of the concepts of business ethics?" (p. 319). This study hinges on the belief that organizations can find the answer in the connection between an organization's emphasis on stakeholders and organizational ethics. Organizations that adopt the stakeholder approach seek to include their understanding of stakeholders' issues in their decision-making process to ensure the well-being of both the organization and stakeholders (Harrison, Bosse, & Phillips, 2010) and this approach is ethically imperative for favorable organization-public relationship building and maintenance (Bowen, 2008).

This study looks at ethics at the meso-level, as the management of an organization's own conduct, rather than as the management of employees' ethical behaviors (e.g., Gatewood & Carroll, 1991). To distinguish this organizational-level ethical management from the management of employees' behaviors, this study uses the term *ethical organizational conduct*. McDonald and Nijhof (1999) acknowledged the different levels of business ethics (i.e., political system, organization, and individuals). However, what constitutes ethical organizational conduct for key stakeholders is less clear than what organizational misconduct is (Szwajkowski, 1992). To set the boundaries of ethical conduct, Arthur (1984) suggested that "business ethics deal with relationships" and "their validity depends on mutual acceptance" (p. 321). Corporate ethics deals with patterns of organizational conduct, which involves stakeholder relationships and identification of the affected stakeholder groups (Arthur, 1984).

Public relations has been known to bring ethical value to management decisions. Several scholars have emphasized the two-way symmetrical communication model with stakeholders (Bowen, 2008), which holds the most promise for an organization's social

responsiveness and ethical organization-stakeholder relationship (Black & Härtel, 2003). Bowen (2008) supported two-way symmetrical communication with stakeholders as a way for an organization to fulfill its moral duty to engage in dialogue with stakeholders. Furthermore, Black and Härtel's (2003) study shows that a public relations orientation that emphasizes dialogue with stakeholders contributes to a CSR orientation that incorporates ethical business behavior and accountability. The bridging strategy emphasizes problem solving between the organization and its publics by managing the organization's behaviors and by pairing them with communication. Therefore the following hypothesis is posited:

H1. Adoption of the bridging strategy as the public relations strategy is positively associated with ethical organizational conduct toward stakeholders.

Conversely, an organization that adopts the buffering strategy is less likely to be perceived as ethical since its emphasis on images and impressions may create skepticism about the organization's actual behavior when a gap exists. The effectiveness of public relations strategy depends on a company's track record (Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2007), not a created image or impression. Ethical conduct is about more than staying within legal boundaries; rather it requires conscious and proactive decision making in the interest of stakeholders, such as Johnson and Johnson's response to its Tylenol case (Rehak & International Herald Tribune, 2002). Furthermore, truthfulness is not a sufficient condition for ethicality; rather, the moral obligation of dialogue, respect of others, and mutual understanding in addition to veracity make communication ethical (Bowen, 2008). As the buffering strategy is an organization-oriented, messaging-focused strategy, an organization inclined to adopt it is likely to focus on shaping publics' perceptions about the organization in a favorable direction, instead of correcting its problematic behavior, and as a result its behavior is less likely to be seen as ethical for stakeholder relations. Therefore the following hypothesis is posited:

H2. Adoption of the buffering strategy as the public relations strategy is negatively associated with ethical organizational conduct toward stakeholders.

2.3. Relational improvement

Relational improvement is believed to lead to positive business outcomes, such as increased financial returns and competitive advantages (Hillman & Keim, 2001). Stafford and Canary (1991) suggested that positivity, openness, sharing of tasks, social networks, and assurances contribute to relationship cultivation, and that these cultivation efforts are related to positive relational outcomes. When this concept is applied to public relations, an organization's relationship cultivation strategies are understood as "any organizational behavioral efforts that attempt to build and sustain quality relationships with strategic publics" (Ki & Hon, 2009; p. 245, *italic emphasis added*). We posit that organizations adopting the bridging strategy are likely to have a greater degree of relational improvement in their relationships with key stakeholders. Relationship cultivation and maintenance strategies have been posited as precursors of relationship quality (Dhanesh, 2013) because cultivation strategies and effective communication help organizations make strategic and responsible decisions and behaviors that meet the needs of stakeholders. In contrast, since an organization using the buffering strategy focuses on improving its image or symbolic reputation rather than improving relationships with its key publics by rectifying its problematic behaviors or decisions that cause conflicts between the management and its publics, it is less likely that the organization will experience relational improvement as a result of their buffering strategy.

However, an organization's propensity to a certain public relations strategy by itself may not directly bring relational improvement. This outcome can be brought about through an organization's ethical decisions, policies, or behaviors that affect its key stakeholders such as employees, customers, and subcontractors. For example, two-way symmetrical communication affects organization-public relationship through corporate authenticity (Shen & Kim, 2012). Top management support for ethical behavior (Koh & Boo, 2004) and ethical climate (Wang & Hsieh, 2012) have a significant effect on employee satisfaction. A positive association has also been found between an organization's ethical behavior for stakeholders and financial outcomes (Jones, 1995). It is then logical to suggest that the bridging strategy enables organizations to manage their behaviors and decisions ethically for their stakeholders and as a result of ethical organizational conduct, organizations will experience positive relational outcomes from these stakeholder relationships.

H3. Ethical conduct is positively associated with relational improvement.

2.4. Conflict avoidance

Conflict is one of the most foundational concepts that affects public relations practice, and requires strategic decisions to generate solutions that will influence the organization as well as the stakeholders (Plowman, 2005). Plowman (2005) argued that strategic communication starts with the identification of potential issues in organization-public relationships. It is important to manage these issues and conflicts in advance to minimize potential damage to the organization. Murphy and Dee (1992) observed that conflicts can be resolved by using compatible ground rules, negotiation, compromise, and two-way symmetrical communication. Huang (2001) found that improving organization-public relationships helps an organization achieve more cooperation or reduced conflict with stakeholders. Furthermore, quality organization-public relationships have been shown to mediate the relationship between public relations strategy using ethical communication and conflict resolution (Huang, 2001). Therefore, it is posited that conflict avoidance results from improved relationship with stakeholders.

H4. Relational improvement is negatively associated with conflicts with stakeholders.

Table 1
Participant information.

Industry	Number of organization	Percentage (%)
Production goods manufacturing	44	41.9
Consumer goods manufacturing	23	21.9
Finance	9	8.6
Services	17	16.2
Construction	3	2.9
Others	9	8.5
Total	105	100

3. Method

This study used purposive sampling ([Stacks, 2002](#)) that selects certain participants for the focus of the research. In-house corporate communication/public relations managers in South Korea, a country that has seen exponential growth in its public relations industry, were targeted in this study. Corporate communication/public relations managers were chosen as they are the most appropriate participants to respond about their organizations' propensity to certain public relations strategy and its outcomes.

An online survey in Korean was administered in 2013 using Qualtrics. Members of two professionals associations in South Korea, the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) and Korean Research based Pharmaceutical Industry Association (KRPIA) were contacted, resulting in 2242 emails sent out to communication practitioners representing 529 organizations. Responses were received from 106 practitioners representing 105 organizations ($N = 105$, unit of analysis: organization). Of the 106 practitioners, two belonged to the same organization. However, of those two responses, one was incomplete and therefore removed from analysis, yielding a final sample of 105 organizations, each represented by one communication manager (for participant information, see [Table 1](#)). Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and measures of all variables are available upon request to the first author.

3.1. Measures

3.1.1. Public relations strategies

The scales for an organization's propensity to use public relations strategy were created based on [Kim's \(2014\)](#) conceptualizations of interpretive (buffering) and strategic management (bridging) strategies using a seven-point Likert scale. A reliability test using Cronbach's alpha for each construct was performed using the SPSS 21 program ($\alpha = 0.963$ for bridging, $\alpha = 0.842$ for buffering).

3.1.2. Ethical organizational conduct

This study used the Federation of Korean Industries-Business Ethics Index (FKI-BEX) ([The Federation of Korean Industries, 2007](#)) to measure ethical conduct. Considering that the sample is Korean organizations and that the index was promoted among the Korean organizations, these measures were used for this study. The BEXI measures seven dimensions: (1) ethical management policy and system (61 items), (2) customers (41 items), (3) employees (59 items), (4) contractors and business partners (33 items), (5) shareholders and investors (36 items), (6) competitors (17 items), and (7) community and global society (38 items). This study focuses on three dimensions—customers, employees, and contractors and business partners—since these groups of stakeholders affect and are affected the most by an organization's decisions and behaviors. A total of 14 items measured ethical conduct (Reliability: $\alpha = 0.839$ for customer dimension; $\alpha = 0.938$ for employee dimension; $\alpha = 0.916$ for business partner and subcontractors dimension).

3.1.3. Relational improvement

Items adapted from [Dozier, Grunig, and Grunig \(1995\)](#) were used to measure relational improvement effects. Since this study required public relations/corporate communication managers to report their respective organizations' public relations strategy preference, ethical conduct, and outcomes, the IABC Excellence study's concept and measures of change-of-relationship effect was adopted to measure relational improvement (reliability: $\alpha = 0.961$).

3.1.4. Conflict avoidance

Items adapted from [Dozier et al. \(1995\)](#) were used to measure the conflict avoidance. Conflict avoidance refers to avoidance of potential conflicts such as boycotts, strikes, and complaints from publics (reliability: $\alpha = 0.906$).

3.2. Data analysis

First, correlations were tested between the summed items for each construct ([Table 2](#)). Second, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with principal component analysis was used to test the measurement items of the two types of public relations strategies and of ethical organizational conduct, which have not been empirically examined before. Third, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was chosen for hypothesis testing. For structural equation modelling analysis (SEM), a sample size of 100 is usually sufficient ([Anderson & Gerbing, 1984](#)). Maximum likelihood (ML) procedures were used for data analysis with IBM SPSS 21 AMOS. Missing

Table 2
Correlations.

Correlations							
	Buffering	Bridging	Conflict Avoidance	Relational Improvement	Ethical Conduct (Customers)	Ethical Conduct (Employees)	Ethical Conduct (Partners)
Buffering	1						
Bridging	0.460**	1					
Conflict Avoidance	0.274**	0.294**	1				
Relational Improvement	0.378**	0.545**	0.670**	1			
Ethical Conduct (Customer)	0.411**	0.512**	0.435**	0.523**	1		
Ethical Conduct (Employee)	0.305**	0.610**	0.244*	0.374**	0.540**	1	
Ethical Conduct (Business Partners)	0.382**	0.550**	0.272**	0.368**	0.555**	0.636**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

data was treated using Expected Maximization (EM) imputation.

4. Results

First, the 10 items for public relations strategies and the 14 items for ethical organizational conduct were subjected to a principal components analysis (PCA) using the IBM SPSS 21 program. Prior to performing the PCA, the suitability of data for factor analysis for two variables was assessed. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients of 0.3 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.89 for the PCA of public relations strategies and 0.90 for the PCA of ethical organizational conduct, exceeding the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1970). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) reached statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. An Oblimin rotation was performed for extraction.

Principal components analysis of public relations strategies revealed the presence of two components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 49.88 percent and 15.05 percent of the variance respectively. Regarding validity, 64.93% of total variance suggests that scales of public relations strategies (bridging and buffering) have sound explanatory power in explicating two types of public relations strategies. As shown in Table 3, standard factor loadings ranged from 0.50 to 0.91.

Meanwhile, principal components analysis of ethical organizational conduct revealed the presence of three components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 57.45 percent, 11.60 percent, and 8.9 percent of the variance respectively, which contributed to 78.02% of total variance. (Table 4).

Next, a second-order factor analysis of the overall measurement model (CFA) was conducted using IBM AMOS 22. To evaluate the model-data fit, the following model fit indices were used: CFI \geq 0.90 (moderate fit), CFI \geq 0.95 (good fit), $0.08 \leq$ RMSEA \leq 0.10 (moderate fit), RMSEA \leq 0.08 (good fit) (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996), $0 \leq$ SRMR \leq 1.0 (moderate fit), and SRMR \leq 0.08 (good fit) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The proposed measurement models were tested as initially specified and then modifications using error covariance were made. The measurement model showed a moderate model fit except for the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.915, RMSEA = 0.073, SRMR = 0.073 when Chi-square[df] = 697.901[448]).

Next, the hypothesized structural paths were examined. The proposed structural equation model showed a moderate fit (CFI = 0.914, RMSEA = 0.073, SRMR = 0.076 when Chi-square[df] = 707.217 [453]). While the bridging strategy was expected to

Table 3
Exploratory Factor Analysis for Measurement Items of Public Relations Strategies (N = 105).

Item	Pattern coefficients		Structure coefficients		Communalities
	Component	Component	Component	Component	
Buffering 1		0.789	0.348	0.804	0.647
Buffering 2		0.617	0.337	0.654	0.435
Buffering 3		0.498	0.487	0.612	0.446
Buffering 4		0.869		0.800	0.666
Bridging 1	0.907		0.901	0.342	0.811
Bridging 2	0.699		0.763	0.439	0.605
Bridging 3	0.840		0.850	0.356	0.722
Bridging 4	0.896		0.886	0.328	0.785
Bridging 5	0.868		0.840		0.709
Bridging 6	0.817		0.816	0.319	0.665

Note: Extraction method was Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin rotation.

Table 4

Exploratory Factor Analysis for Measurement Items of Ethical Organizational Conduct (N = 105).

Item	Pattern coefficients			Structure coefficients			Communalities
	Component	Component	Component	Component	Component	Component	
Ethical conduct (Customers) 1			0.835	0.504	0.490	0.886	0.791
Ethical conduct (Customers) 2			0.911	0.419	0.425	0.888	0.790
Ethical conduct (Customers) 3			0.834	0.393	0.443	0.835	0.699
Ethical conduct (Employees) 1	0.908		0.869	0.397	0.437	0.763	0.763
Ethical conduct (Employees) 2	0.844		0.833	0.459	0.373	0.697	0.697
Ethical conduct (Employees) 3	0.986		0.944	0.454	0.447	0.896	0.896
Ethical conduct (Employees) 4	0.813		0.915	0.632	0.490	0.864	0.864
Ethical conduct (Employees) 5	0.797		0.899	0.600	0.515	0.828	0.828
Ethical conduct (Employees) 6	0.712		0.854	0.589	0.563	0.768	0.768
Ethical conduct (Partners) 1		0.833	0.581	0.902	0.485	0.826	0.826
Ethical conduct (Partners) 2		0.832	0.492	0.873	0.503	0.767	0.767
Ethical conduct (Partners) 3		0.818	0.637	0.910	0.472	0.860	0.860
Ethical conduct (Partners) 4		0.603	0.522	0.744	0.512	0.587	0.587
Ethical conduct (Partners) 5		0.966	0.354	0.875	0.409	0.785	0.785

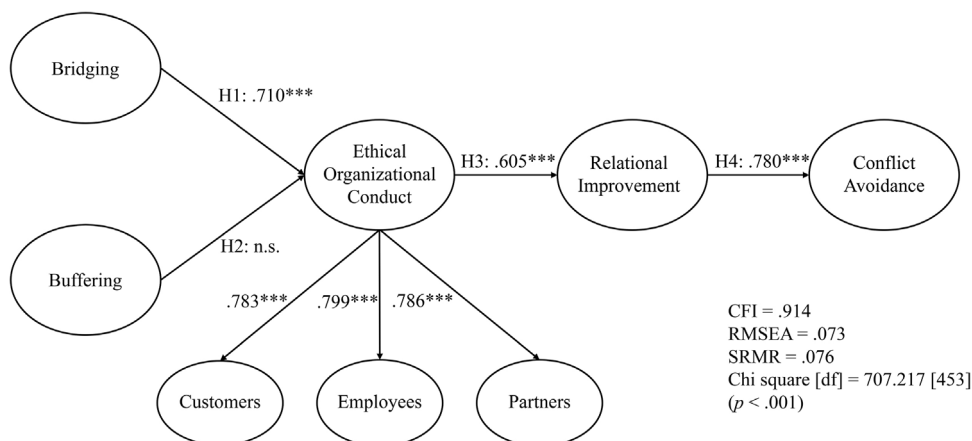
Note: Extraction method was Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin rotation.

predict an organization's ethical conduct (H1), a negative relationship between buffering and ethical organizational conduct was expected (H2). The test for H1 revealed a significant relationship between the bridging strategy and ethical conduct ($b = 0.710^{***}$, $p < .000$). However, H2 was not supported. Then, a positive relationship between ethical organizational conduct and relational improvement was also identified ($b = 0.605^{***}$, $p < 0.001$) (H3) (Fig. 1). The relationship between relational improvement and the conflict avoidance was also found to be significant (H4), and the hypothesis was supported ($b = 0.780^{***}$, $p < 0.001$).

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of an organization's public relations strategy adoption on its ethical conduct and two relational outcomes, and as such, is one of the first efforts to do so. There has been little empirical research that has operationalized ethical organizational conduct in relation to stakeholder relationships. The proposed model of ethical organizational conduct in this study suggests that organizations need to ethically manage behaviors that affect their key stakeholders, especially functional linkages that are the foundation of their business and survival (Barney, 1986; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In other words, the focus of ethical management should incorporate both managing employees' behaviors and managing the organization's behaviors that affect its key stakeholders, including employees, customers, and business partners. By doing so, managers can look at the problems and outcomes of corporate ethics holistically – from individual level to organizational level – to better suggest solutions for ethical management. Even though the scales for ethical organizational conduct (KFI-BEX) were created by The Federation of Korean Industries (2007) to encourage ethical conduct among Korean corporations, they may also be used as ethics audits for corporations in other countries to identify problems in organizational practice that discourages ethical behavior. PCA analysis showed that the scales used in this study are valid measures.

The results of this study show that when an organization manages its ethical conduct towards key stakeholders responsibly, it experiences improved relationships and less conflict with their key stakeholders. This will give the organization advantage over

**Fig. 1.** Results of Structural Equation Model.

competitors, allowing it to save potential costs of managing conflicts and issues. Hillman and Keim (2001) also suggested that managing relationships with key stakeholders and focusing on *relational value* allows the organization to have competitive advantage. Relational outcomes are based on organizations' ethical behaviors, and a tendency toward the bridging strategy encourages such ethical behaviors. In focusing on ethical conduct and stakeholder management through proactive communication management efforts, organizations may expect long term benefits.

This study also tested two types of public relations strategies and their effects, and suggested a viable strategy for positive relational outcomes. By reconfiguring the relationships between the key concepts from public relations, stakeholder theory, and corporate ethics, this study redirects scholarly attention to the ethical aspect of strategies. The findings in this study show that normative theory may help organizations perform better by identifying what type of strategy should be selected for positive organizational outcomes. In addition, this research fills a void in studies on organizations' strategy to accommodate and respond properly to the pressures of stakeholders in order to attain organizational effectiveness (Julian, Ofori-Dankwa, & Justis, 2008). The identified relationships between the two strategies and organizational outcomes – ethical organizational conduct, relational improvement, and conflict avoidance, demonstrate that when an organization is inclined toward adopting the bridging strategy, it tends to be more conscious of potential consequences of its behavior on its key stakeholders, and consequently tries to manage its conduct more responsibly for those key stakeholders, keeping their interests in mind. In contrast, the lack of association between the adoption of the buffering strategy and ethical conduct is indicative of the ineffectiveness of the buffering strategy in encouraging ethical conduct and its attendant relational outcomes. Corporations strive to create an image of being socially responsible by creating brand stories; however, the effects of these images may be fleeting unless such rhetoric is followed by ethical behaviors. Instead, this study shows how adopting the bridging strategy brings value to an organization.

This research contributes to the theoretical development of public relations strategy. By conceptualizing and operationalizing these two types of public relations strategies, this research redirects scholarly attention on public relations strategies from the direction of communication (one way versus two way) and balance of intended effect (asymmetrical versus symmetrical) to the tool of communication (message versus action), the focus of communication (organization versus relationship) and purpose of communication (image management versus problem solving). Cancel et al. (1997) offered an alternative to the dimension of the balance of intended effects: advocacy and accommodation. However, their conceptualization still puts an organization and its publics at opposite ends and defines their relationship by confrontation. By placing the focus on organization versus relationship, this research answers the call for the inclusion of the relationship aspect in public relations models (Laskin, 2009). By moving the emphasis from the balance of intended effects to the purpose of strategies, this study attempts to provide better descriptions of public relations strategies in practice. Public relations strategies are neither pure cooperation or total accommodation toward stakeholder interest.

Directions for future research include investigating the relationship between buffering and bridging strategies. In this exploratory study, buffering and bridging are conceptualized as binary. However, results of correlations show that buffering and bridging are not negatively correlated (Table 2), indicating that the two may not be mutually exclusive. Conceptually, it is less likely for an organization that values its relationship with key stakeholders and behaves ethically to simultaneously ignore its key stakeholders and behave unethically. However, in the survey, participant organizations answered about their tendency toward both strategies. The results therefore indicate propensity or emphasis on one over the other, rather than absolute adoption of either. Future research should consider undertaking an empirical study that tests the newly proposed theoretical framework in the context of stakeholders' evaluations or perceptions of an organization's public relations strategies and their behaviors. In addition, a cross-cultural study should be conducted to explore and identify similar patterns or other unique factors that explain organizations' propensity for certain corporate communication management strategies. Finally, more research is needed to develop better scales of measuring bridging and buffering strategies.

This study has some limitations. It aimed for statistical generalization, and its samples came from representatives of organizations in Korea. Although the sample size could be seen as limited, the total accessible population (number of organizations in Korea) is fewer than 600 and thus the response rate (19.8 percent) for a noncompensated survey was actually very high. Findings in this study need to be cross-validated in different cultural contexts. In addition, organizations were asked to respond to measures of both buffering and bridging strategies; it was difficult to identify organizations that adopt only one public relations strategy. The authors believe in the value and contribution of creating and testing the measures of buffering and bridging strategies together as a continuum for further theoretical development in public relations. However, future research could look at the two strategies as operating separately, and design studies to examine the differences between low and high tendency toward one strategy in greater depth. Furthermore, there may be other possible factors predicting or fostering ethical organizational conduct, such as organizational culture or type of leadership (e.g., Men, 2014). Despite these limitations, the proposed model in this study is still a major step toward the conceptual evolution of a normative model of corporate ethics.

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