RESEARCH ARTICLE

Values of Government Public Relations for a Rocky Road to Participatory Democracy: Testing Public Engagement, Empowerment, and Serenity Hypotheses in Public Sector Communication

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ABSTRACT: Voluntary citizen attention and actions are key to successful public-sector communication. We investigated the conditions which increase such attention and actions using the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) and government-citizen relationships (GCRs). Using three national issues consisting of an environmental issue, a social issue, and a political issue from South Korea (N=275), this study examined three hypotheses regarding public engagement effect (the effect of GCRs on political conversations on national issues), government empowerment effect (the effects of GCRs and issue-specific trust toward government on constraint recognition), and public serenity effect (the effect of issue-specific trust on problem recognition and involvement recognition). We found significant public engagement and government empowerment effects and partially significant public serenity effect. The results of the public serenity investigation found that issue-specific trust toward government was significant with problem recognition but insignificant with involvement recognition. Consequently, the findings illustrate strategic values in government-citizen relationships on public engagement, empowerment, and serenity to enable participatory democracy.

KEYWORDS: Government-Citizen Relationships, Participatory Democracy, Public Engagement, Public-Sector Communication, Situational Theory of Problem Solving

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1. Introduction

Organizations in the public sector such as state or federal governments and other institutions running health care, military, or civil infrastructures occupy important bilateral positions in administrating public goods and state-involving services such as public safety and education (Shafritz, Russell, and Borick 2015). Although their establishment and management can be self-financing, they differ from those in other sectors such as the private sector (corporations) and the social sector (non-profit organizations) in that public-sector organizations must consider the values of citizens in their decisions (Liu, Horsley, and Levenshus 2010). Thus, public-sector organizations are public enterprises under public ownership and control.

Organizations in the public sector may experience harsher collisions of value systems among strategic constituencies (i.e., publics and stakeholders) because their values are less uniform than those of organizations in the private sector. For that reason, public-sector organizations must develop formal structures that include public interests (e.g., public relations or public affairs function) alongside informal cultures and shared value systems (e.g., inclusive management and symmetrical communication) that align with those of external constituencies. Participation from strategic constituencies is essential for successful public-sector communication.

Despite the importance of citizen participation, communication with entire populations remains a daunting task because publics range from receptive to indifferent. In any given issue, it is possible to identify four types of publics: active, aware, latent, and nonpublic (Grunig and Kim 2017). Unless personal conditions are met- that is, individual recognition of problematic situations- individuals do not communicate (Kim and Grunig 2011). This frustrates public-sector communicators whose work requires public attention and actions. Without voluntary participation from their constituencies (the entirety of their operational population), they can fail to earn legitimacy and resources. However, the formation of concerned and participatory citizens and publics for public-sector organizations remains a puzzle.

Given this background, this study investigates questions for public-sector communicators: What, if anything, makes disinterested citizens (passive publics) interested in social problems? What makes those citizens participatory and/or helps them conceive that they can make a difference in social or national issues? In so doing, we aim to further the normative mission of participatory democracy by encouraging citizen engagement and empowerment for problems and issues of national interest.

1. Understanding Public-Sector Communication

After World War II, countries such as the U.S. recognized the need for effective public-sector communication for the spread of 'good ideas' (Lynn-Jones 1998). Modernity cultivated by scientific and technological innovation had transferred to industrial practice, and the fruits of new knowledge and technologies were picked up and delivered through mass production and mass consumption (Thompson 1995). But while profiteering facilitated the spread and adoption of these innovations, lay publics (vs. elites or experts) were slow to utilize their benefits. It was an indirect, two-step flow from knowledge and expertise to commercialized benefits to lay people, mostly in the name of consumerism (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). However, post-war reconstruction also expedited the birth and development of welfare states. Citizens and publics of social interests became the next target for the spread of good ideas. Governments and social institutions looked for ways to diffuse knowledge and elucidate myths of pre-modern society for lay citizens and publics.

For public-sector institutions such as governments or health organizations, the mission of enlightening citizens and lay publics is noble and urgent. However, administrators and experts have expressed the presumptuous beliefs, which some would call intellectual arrogance that they know the truth and that lay citizens must be informed and corrected (Edwards 1998). They have favored top-down approaches and one-way flows of information. On one hand, experts and administrators deserve commendation for their commitment to truth and ultimately to the welfare of lay citizens. On the other hand, their actions ring of elitism and have faced resistance in the forms of intellectual contempt, anti-intellectualism, and rejection of science since the 1960s.

2. Communicative Action of Government and Citizens

Social elites and experts associated with public-sector organizations have long struggled to affect the cognitive fields of lay citizens. They have believed that mass media, since it was new media, would powerfully affect audience minds and behaviors (Thompson 1995). From agricultural innovation in the '60s and '70s to health and risk communication from the '80s to the present, they have sought new media strategies to penetrate or evade people's cognitive walls. In those studies, the communication is mostly strategic speaking and strategic messaging. Hence communicative action is considered a cause or independent variable, and audience (public) thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are considered consequences or dependent variables allegedly modified by the selection of messaging strategies. This is called the "administrative paradigm in communication" in audience research (McQuail 2010) or the "symbolic interpretive paradigm" in public relations (Grunig 2009; Kim and Ni 2013) and conceptualizes citizens or lay publics as passive and audience or public control through strategic messaging as possible and desirable. However, these paradigms fail frequently in public-sector communication. Despite occasional successes, the larger number of public-sector one-way or top-down communications are disappointingly ineffective.

For that reason, many communication and media theorists have admonished the control paradigm of administrative communication. James E. Grunig in the 1960s and '70s reimagined communication effects through his research on poor farmers in Colombia (Grunig 1969). He found that people (farmers) are constrained and fatalistic. Unless they recognize that a problem exists and any problem-solving barriers are lifted, they will neither seek nor attend to the problem or its information. This showed why top-down, one-way persuasion campaigns fail. In the administrative paradigm of public communication, communicative action is an independent variable – that is, with a perfect system of messaging and media planning, target audiences will understand the problem and adopt recommended behaviors. Kim and Krishna (2014) explained situational theory of problem solving as an alternative communication theory. In this theory, communication is a dependent variable, whereas subjective perception, cognition, and motivation are independent variables. People exert control by choosing what to think about and what to do in life situations (Kim and Grunig 2011). Their perceptual, cognitive, and motivational resources are weighed and distributed as they prefer.

Communication in situational theory is the purposive action for problem solving or making sense of a cognitive problem. Kim and Grunig (2011) referred to communicative actions as epiphenomenal to problem-solving actions. While the administration paradigm aims at changing behaviors through "messaging," the situational theory proposes communicative actions that enable people to decide for themselves in given situations. In the generalized situational theory of problem solving (Kim and Grunig 2011), people who recognize the problem, possess sufficient motivation, and perceive their capability to influence personal and social conditions become communicatively active and use communication to further behavioral efforts to change a prob-

lematic situation. Thus, situational theorists recommend facilitating conditions for problem discovery and removing "constraints" that prohibit or limit peoples' capacity for personal and social change. In doing so, communicative action is treated as a dependent variable that responds to the personal conditions of individuals, and the organization is better rewarded by using it as a listening tool (vs. speaking tool) to identify constraints, mobilize resources, and affect policy (actions) rather than to coordinate messaging only.

3. Nature of Publics: Motivational Continuum in Problem Solving

Defining Public(s)

The word "public" in "public sector" refers to "people in general" and the matters "affecting all the people in the whole area of a nation or state" (Merriam Webster n.d.). In this vein, public is the general population for a society. It is used as the opposing concept of "private." Thus, the public is a singular term and a monolithic body of consisting of all members of society when it is used in "public sector" or "private sector." In contrast, in public relations, publics are subsets of the general population who pertain to specific problems or interests. They are non-monolithic -- multifarious and diverse as people recognize problems concerning their private lives. Thus, "publics" is treated as a plural term and its key characteristic is situational collectives rising and falling around problems of common concern (Grunig and Kim, 2017; Kim and Grunig 2011).

Public-Sector Communication between an Organization and Its Publics

Most organizational decisions and management behaviors have consequences to subsets of people, if not all people. In turn, those consequences become problematic for some, who will experience rising motivation to think about them and act accordingly. It is clearly noted in public-sector communication (e.g., federal government), it is common for the entirety of a population to be stakeholders. Even in such cases, not everyone recognizes or is interested in the consequences of problems. For example, amid global pandemic COVID-19, which is a problem for all humankind and the entirety of every state population, not every individual considers it similarly serious. Some are more motivated, while others are apathetic (e.g., many college students disregarded health warnings over spring break).

For that reason, communication in public relations is only strategic when communicators can discern the varying nature of the population. People pay attention to problems or become interested in acquiring or transmitting thoughts, feelings, and questions for problems only when they recognize those problems -the world is filtered through our personal universe, and its life situations are thus subjective (Kim 2006; Kim and Grunig 2011). The situational theory of problem solving (hereafter, STOPS) explains when people pay attention to and become motivated to communicate about certain problems over the others.

STOPS, a communication theory, has been used to predict communicative behaviors of publics in problem-solving situations (Kim and Grunig, 2011). Because people cannot be interested in all possible problems in the world, people are selective with their attention. They devote cognitive and physical resources to a limited number of problems. In other words, when people communicate for some problems, they stop communicating for many or all others. For this, situational theorists advise communicators who engage with publics to *identify* who is relatively more interested when offered opportunities for communicative interaction. People without sufficient levels of problem-solving motivation tend to disregard such offers. Unless communicators have unlimited resources (e.g., staff time and money for media fees), it is more effective to discern who has greater motivation (active publics who want to communicate about the problem with the organization) and who faces

greater risks (passive publics who need to communicate but are uninterested for various reasons). The research tradition of public relations, however, has shown the ineffectiveness of communicating with passive or non-publics.

In private or social sectors of public communication, communicators can prioritize resources toward motivated subsets of population. However, in the public sector, communicators must often consider both active and passive publics to address problems. Such expensive and challenging communication situations are frequent and common for organizations in the public sector (e.g., government). The greatest challenge lies in the question of how to make passive or disinterested citizens communicate or engage in communicative efforts.

Public spheres arise when people discuss issues in social spaces (e.g., coffee bars or saloons). According to STOPS, when people perceive indeterminate situations--that is, when an intrusive moment disrupts their perceptual composure--they turn their attention to the disruptive cause. Problem recognition is defined as a sharp and intrusive discrepancy between expectation and experiential states (Kim and Grunig 2011). This discrepancy-causing intrusion is dependent on the recognizer. That is, it is a function of the recognizer's expectations which are individualistic and subjective (Kim and Krishna 2014).

The subjective sense of problem seriousness is often uncorrelated with the objective weight or seriousness of the problem. The lack of correlation between subjective and objective problem seriousness creates challenges for public-sector communication. The provision of information and attempts at persuasion often fail to affect publics' minds. To the frustration of experts and governments, lay people frequently fail to see and accept obvious facts and risks. Public-sector communication tries to narrow the perceptual and cognitive gaps between experts and lay publics to coordinate democratic actions. The need and importance of public participation become especially salient when societies face unprecedented problems.

Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS)

According to STOPS, situational perceptions (i.e., problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition) influence individuals' situational motivation in problem solving. Further, situational motivation in problem solving and previous experiences/knowledge or improvised subjective knowledge (i.e., referent criterion) make them active in communicative behaviors (Kim and Grunig 2011). In a problem or specific issue situation, there is a continuum from absent motivation to high motivation, and publics vary from nonpublic or latent public to aware or active public. The continuum of motivation and the varying public status in a problem could explain why people do or do not communicate. Nonpublics or latent publics are the least or less likely to research and discuss problems even with great risks or harms.

Recent challenges support this claim. Amid global pandemic COVID-19, governments and social institutions such as health agencies face a crippling lack of public participation in the face of unprecedented risks. Disengaged citizens and apathetic publics tend to distance themselves from government efforts and halt cooperative problem solving. For instance, individuals who ignore expert and governmental advice for social distancing and other protective behaviors have accelerated the spread of COVID-19 in most societies. In fact, despite rising risks from the rapidly spreading virus, there is evidence of *problem irrecognition*, or the refusal of lay citizens to see the current pandemic as the greatest threat since the Spanish flu.

The solution to problem irrecognition is not persuasive information campaigns. As in STOPS, people must first achieve *endogenous* problem recognition to the *exogenous* risks or harms. The cognitive door must be opened by key holders, and the people themselves have the key. In other words, external threats will never translate into publics' cognitive problems unless they first recognize the threats and accept their seriousness (Grunig and Kim 2017; Kim and Grunig 2011).

In sum, public-sector communicators face great challenges in considering all citizens or the entire populations of their societies. In private sector or corporate communication, the relatively narrow subsets of missions and stakeholders help prioritize communication resources to only those who would pay attention to and seek out information from their organization. Their primary publics are already active or aware. However, public-sector communicators are bound by their normative mission, the *raison d'être* of public institutions, of serving all members of society. They must communicate with passive publics and even non-publics who have less motivation regarding communicated contents. For example, public-sector communicators must actively involve all types of publics in significant national issues such as public health risk situations (e.g., COVID-19), public health information campaigns (e.g., health preventive behaviors), and public safety (e.g., protests). However, gaining attention and motivating communicative behavior from the less interested of those publics is an uphill battle against deep-seated cognitive walls.

4. Nature of Communication Tasks in Public Sector: Public-Initiated versus Organization-Initiated Communication Problems

For successful public-sector communication, communicators need to understand the normative nature of communication tasks. As noted earlier, when public-sector communicators aim to solve given problems, they face different communication situations. For example, a public might arise when individuals find certain consequences problematic (Public-initiated communication problem or PPR problem, Kim and Ni 2013); alternatively, an organization be the first to identify a problem for one of its key constituencies (organization-initiated communication problem or OPR problem, Kim and Ni 2013).

Figure 1. Two Types of Communication Problems for Organizations.
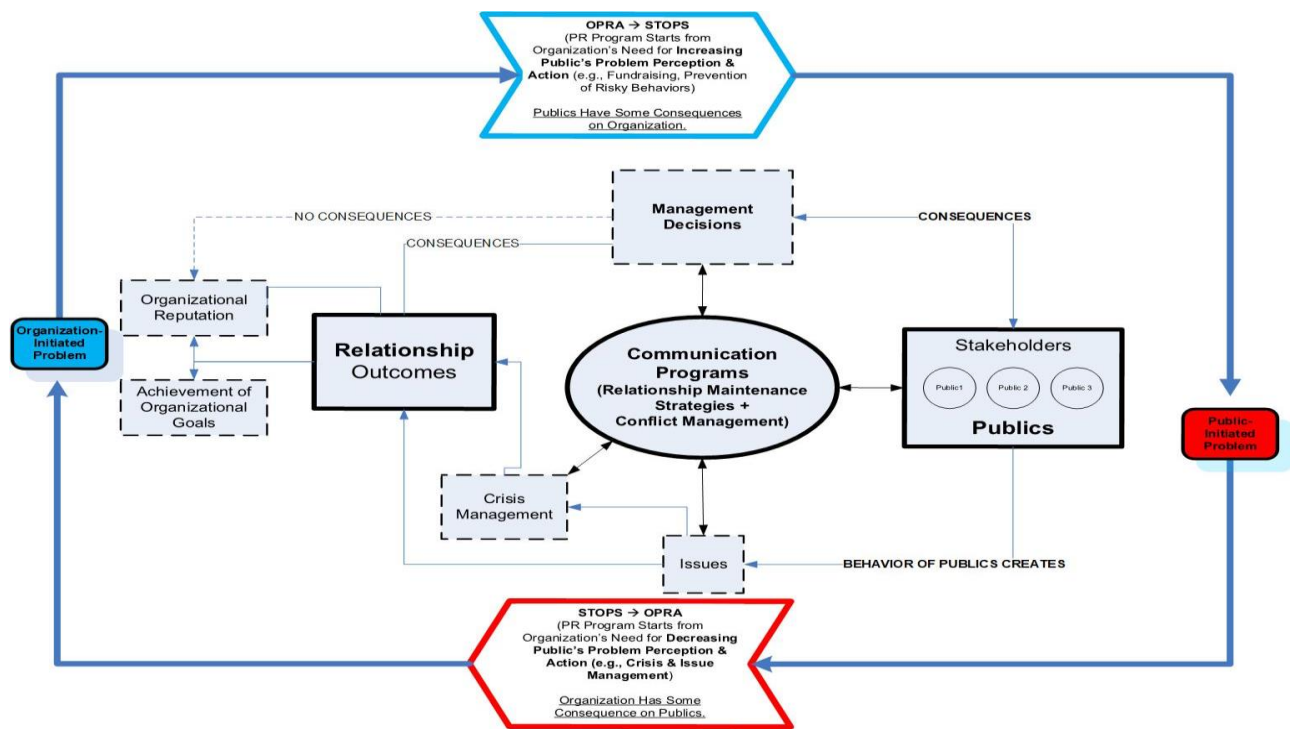
Unlike in other sectors, agents or actors in public-sector organizations are constrained by the obligation to inform and involve even disinterested citizens and passive publics. Their tasks often differ from those in the private sector who are relatively less bound to include all citizens. In planning and implementing communication with publics, corporate or profit organizations can work in principle of resource efficiency. In contrast, public-sector communicators need to expend effort and resources to include indifferent portions of their population.

There are two important questions for communicators and researchers entering public-sector communication. Citizens' voluntary communicative actions for social problems are a key requirement for successful public-sector communication. When citizens become publics, when they pay attention to and have motivation to think about common problems, they become active in communicative behaviors (Grunig and Kim 2017; Kim and Grunig 2011;). Communicative actions of publics increase common perception among citizens of what problems matter and how society can and should deal with those problems and their consequences. With heightened perception, motivation, and communicative actions for social problems and national issues, they engage with social problem-solving processes and their communicative actions enact participatory democracy (Habermas 1989; Kim, Grunig, and Ni 2010).

For public-sector communication, communicative actions of publics are the engines of social processes that make disinterested people (d)evolve into issue publics. Through these processes, randomly distributed interests among citizens develop common attention, awareness, and actions to address problems. Once a public arises around a certain problem, this situational collective and its members' communicative behaviors enable and legitimize the efforts of governments and responsible institutions to tackle that problem. Public participation from street chats to online comments for social problems makes all things possible – from legitimizing courses of action to mobilizing supports and resources for governments and social institutions.

When communicators spend more time and efforts in resolving issues or managing crises around which publics are already motivated - PPR problems - it indicates that management and communicative efforts are reactive and show incompetency. Hence public-sector communicators work more often to create aware or active publics for the problems or issues threatening their organizational missions - OPR problems (Kim and Ni 2013). However, this means they must communicate with passive publics deeply entrenched in cognitive dugouts. In this vein, public-sector communication (aka. public affairs) must understand the nature of publics to reveal what ways, if any, by which those nonchalant citizens and publics might increase communicative participation or public engagement in response to relevant social problems and issues.

In this study, we investigate the conditions which increase such voluntary communicative actions. From communication theory, the nature of publics in public-sector communication will be highlighted in contrast to private-sector communication (situational theory of problem solving). From the view of public relations (e.g., relationship theory in the Excellence Theory), relationships with strategic constituencies could develop political conversations on relevant issues. Further, the nature of public-sector communication problems will be discussed by using Kim and Ni's (2013) typology of communication problems (e.g., organization-initiated public relations problem).

Specifically, we hypothesize that processes of public political participation – good government-citizen relationships – are more likely to increase trust on governmental issue-management and policy-making efforts; further, public trust will decrease perceptual obstacles regarding actions about a given issue. Finally, we examine the "value of relationships" in public-sector communication. We hypothesize that citizens awarding high trust for governmental issue management and policy making will experience lower problem recognition and higher involvement recognition (public serenity effect). Serenity effect refers to trust effect on reduced issue concerns of publics. Using the situational theory of problem solving as a theoretical model (Kim and

Grunig 2011), we test the importance of good relationships and trust on issue management and citizen participatory efforts.

5. Conceptualization

Modern society in the Western tradition overcame authoritarian medieval power structures and amended social hierarchies which enslaved lay citizens. Habermas' concept of public spheres captures the notion of attentive lay people to social problems affecting their lives (Habermas 1989). Public spheres form when ordinary people (cf. social elites) discuss questions with and listen to views from people like them. The communicative actions of lay publics are the voluntary and participatory actions which enable democracy to forward. However, the road to voluntary public spheres is rocky. Individual citizens and lay publics sparingly pay attention and develop motivation toward social problems and concerns. Their attention lies mostly in private rather than public or social concerns, even though they are affected substantially. Such indifference or lack of communicative participation among lay citizens has frustrated public-sector communicators.

In this section, this study conceptualizes three major hypotheses related to public-sector communication through government-citizen relationship, political conversation, issue-specific trust toward government, and three situational variables: (1) Public engagement effect (H1), (2) Government empowerment (H2 & H3), and (3) Public serenity effect (H4).

5.1. Government-Citizen Relationship

Strategic communication scholars in line with the relational theorists' viewpoints have studied the relationship between an organization and its public as a focal concept of public relations (e.g., Bowen, Hung-Baesecke, and Chen 2016; Bruning and Ledingham 1999; Chon and Park 2019; Dozier, Grunig, and Grung 2013; Huang 2001; Ledingham 2001). From the relationship theory perspective, which stresses a two-way model, or mutuality, the quality of a relationship strengthens the effectiveness of public relation practices. That is, public relations strongly contributes to organizations' effective operation by building robust relationships with key publics (Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier 2002). Relationship theorists in public relations maintain that relationship building will eventually create mutual understanding and benefits for both organizations and publics (Bruning and Ledingham 1999; Ledingham 2001). Conceptually, the relationship between organizations and publics has been scrutinized to identify its components, antecedents and effects (e.g., Broom, Casey and Ritchey 1997). The paradigm shift toward reciprocal relationship models has led public relation scholars to a more detailed understanding of how communicators in organizations manage issues associated with their target audiences.

To empirically measure relationship quality between an organization and its publics, scholars have designated several types of scales. The Bruning-Ledingham relationship scale (Bruning and Ledingham 1999) was followed by more sophisticated and systemic scales such as organization-public relationship (OPR, Bruning and Ledingham, 1999; Hon and Grunig 1999) and organization-public relationship assessment (OPRA, Huang 2001). OPR constructs a multifaceted model containing four sub-dimensions: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Hon and Grunig 1999). One merit of the OPR scale is that it provides an extensive capture of relationship evaluation from the key public's perception (ibid). The OPR scale has been widely applied to public relation studies in both private and public-sector communication management (e.g. Dhanesh

2014; Seltzer and Zhang 2010; Waters 2008), where OPR is proven as a reliable evaluation tool to assess and check the status of relationships that organizations have with their publics.

Studies based on the relational perspective in organizational public relation efforts have exhibited the importance of relationship in organization communication. Previous research has suggested that a positive relationship between an organization and its publics leads to positive outcomes such as organizational effectiveness (Ki, Kim, and Ledingham 2015). A favorable relationship plays a vital role in enhancing positive attitudes and organization reputation among publics (Tam, Kim, and Kim 2018). In times of government crisis, relationship is also a key factor in governmental crisis management (Chon 2019).

Although relationship effects have been most extensively tested in the private sector (e.g., a corporation and its consumers), they have been tested in the public sector in the relationship between governments and citizens (e.g., Chon 2019; Kim 2015). Besides public relations research, public administration research has examined how citizen relationship affects governmental bodies. For instance, citizen-relationship management (CRM) analyzes the civil services of governmental bodies (e.g., Reddick 2010) by strategically segmenting the public according to their optimal services (e.g., Smith and Huntsman 1997; Thomas 2013). Thomas (2013), for instance, describes three types of publics – citizens, customers and partners, all of which have distinctive expectations of government services, and suggests detailed guidelines for public managers according to these three types. The main interest of this research, of course, is more technical service quality, in which citizens' immediate satisfaction with those services is regarded as most important. This approach could limit the scope when it comes to long-term relationships between government and public. Contrastingly, the relational perspective in public relations studies focuses chiefly on the importance of long-term relationship building and its substantial influences over the public's communication behaviors.

In this study, we conceptualize relationship quality between a government and its citizens as government-citizen relationship. Furthermore, we adopt the relationship perspective to investigate how the public becomes engaged with and develops trust toward governmental issue management.

5.2. Active Political Conversation

A large body of work originating from the Habermasian public sphere theory has acknowledged the value of active citizens' political engagement through the free sharing of opinions. Heated discussions about current affairs have been regarded as a defining element of democracy. The history of liberal democracy in the Western world particularly demonstrates this argument (Habermas 1989) such that political conversation among the general public is considered an indispensable component of democratic society. Further, the related argument about republican liberties (Habermas 1994) holds that citizens carry out their political rights of participation and communication autonomously and privately so that the governmental (administrative) "authority emerges from the citizens' power produced communicatively in the praxis of self-legislation" (Habermas 1994, 2). This mutual understanding process is conceived to approximate the genuine or idealistic notion of democracy. The formation of citizens' political opinions and desires in the public sphere does not follow market processes yet develops in mutual understanding. Dialogue is central in this literature, within which "This dialogic conception imagines politics as contestation over questions of value and not simply questions of preference" (Habermas 1994, 2).

The latest model of Habermas' deliberative democracy redefines the public sphere. He thinks that the public sphere is a communication system mediating 'formal organized deliberation' and 'informal face-to-face deliberation' (Habermas 2006). From his perspective, the public sphere plays a peripheral role in the larger political

system. Although Habermas remained skeptical about the 'mediated public sphere' and mediated deliberation in general since the rise of mass media, he proposed that mediated communication can create a 'weak public' capable of critical evaluation of an argument's rationality and the production of a 'considered public opinion' (ibid).

Unlike Habermas' careful approach to political deliberation in mediated communication, a host of communication scholars have emphasized the advent of a true public sphere action on the Internet, which realizes its users' free exchanges of opinions with fewer temporal and spatial barriers. Avid advocates of this e-public sphere suggest that more citizens participate in online discussions about political or social issues; however, many studies document that it does not necessarily improve participatory or deliberative democracy as hoped. To illustrate, Sunstein's (2000) observations on political polarization in the US suggest that rational deliberation is not workable on the Internet, which instead shapes extremist 'deliberative enclaves' and hampers the formation of consensus in public opinions.

Apart from ongoing polemics concerning how communication technology can contribute to healthy public sphere formation, political talk in people's private lives is indeed the first condition and step toward contemporary democracy. Citizens' daily political conversation is essential to democratic societies (Scheufele 2000). Therefore, without any doubts, public opinion is based on that factor.

In this study, we conceptualize citizens' information transmission behaviors related to government related issues as citizens' conversation on political topics. Particularly, information forwarding behaviors in situational theory of problem solving means one's active willingness to participation in a given issue (Kim and Grunig 2011). This study proposes H1 as follows (Public Engagement Hypothesis).

H1. Positive relationship with government increases citizens' political conversation regarding national issues.

5.3. Issue-Specific Trust toward Government

Trust in the government generally refers to the degree to which an individual perceives the government as "do(ing) the right thing" (Wang and Wart 2007, 266). Trust in the government is an important factor to influence effective governance leading publics' compliance with government (Tsang, Burnett, Hills, and Welford 2009). Previous studies have examined government trust as a critical factor in effective governance (e.g., Chen, Hung-Baesecke, and Kim 2017; Chon and Fondren 2019; Parkins, Beckley, Comeau, Stedman, Rollins, and Kessler 2017).

However, citizens' trust in their government has declined over the last several decades (Denhardt and Denhardt 2009). What improves citizens' trust in government? Some scholars have examined the role of social media to increase government trust (Song and Lee 2015). From the viewpoint of public relations, it is possible to increase citizens' trust in government by cultivating a better relationship. In this study, we focus on issue-specific trust toward government. In other words, this study conceptualizes issue-specific trust as citizens' trust toward government attempts at solving given national issues.

Given how national issues relate to government, the relationship quality with citizens could affect their trust for the government to cope with national issues. When considering the role of a positive relationship, we thus predict positive association between positive government-citizen relationship and issue-specific trust toward government (Public Empowerment and Relationship Values Hypotheses).

H2. Positive relationship with government increases citizens' issue-specific trust toward government.

5.4. Problem Recognition, Involvement Recognition, and Constraint Recognition

In STOPS, problem recognition, involvement recognition, and constraint recognition are used by situational variables to predict communicative behaviors (Kim, et al., 2010). Particularly, as individuals perceive a problem and personal connectedness with the problem, their communicative behaviors are increased (Ni and Kim, 2009). In STOPS, problem recognition is defined as "a perceptual discrepancy between expected and experienced states in a given situation that produces an uncomfortable feeling of badness-of-fit that one experiences in living" (Kim, et al. 2010, 128). Citizens also perceive a personal connection to national issues. Involvement recognition is defined as a perceived connection between the self and the problem (Kim and Grunig 2011). Further, when individuals perceive low obstacles to approach the problem, they are more likely to use communicative behaviors to solve a given problem.

Situational variables have been used to predict citizens' behaviors. For example, Chon (2019) used situational variables to predict pro-megaphoning and anti-megaphoning toward government. The variables were used as antecedents of situational motivation to predict social media activism related to contentious issues (Chon and Park 2020). In this study, we attempt to conceptualize constraint recognition as the effect of empowerment on government. Following Grunig's definition (Grunig 1997, 10), constraint recognition in STOPS is defined as "people perceive that there are obstacles in a situation that limit their ability to do anything about the situation." Generally, when individuals perceive constraints, they rarely communicate in the situations. This study proposes citizens' trust on issues related government can decrease constraint recognition of citizens. That is, we examine the effect of issue-specific trust toward government on constraint recognition of citizens regarding national issues as follows (Public Empowerment and Relationship Values Hypotheses).

H3. Issue specific trust toward government decreases constraint recognition.

In addition, problem recognition and involvement are conceptualized as outcomes of reduced issue concerns from citizens. We test hypotheses regarding the effects of issue-specific trust toward government on citizens' problem recognition and involvement recognition in terms of reduced issue concerns. This study posts the following hypotheses (Serenity Hypothesis).

H4a. Issue specific trust toward government decreases problem recognition.

H4b. Issue specific trust toward government decreases involvement recognition.

6. Method

6.1. Participants and Data Collection

For this study, we conducted an online survey with a sample of 275 Korean citizens during mid- July 2018. Participants were based on a diverse pool of respondent panels from a large research firm in Seoul Korea. Of the total sample, more than half of the participants were female (50.5%, n = 139), and the mean age was 40 years (SD = 11.01). In terms of educational level, a large portion of the respondents had a bachelor's degree (72.4%) or higher (13.1%); 17.7% had completed only high school. Regarding political ideology, more than

half of the respondents described themselves as middle (58.9%), 28.4% of participants described themselves as liberal, and 12.7% described themselves as conservative.

6.2. Three Issues Related to Government in South Korea

This study includes three issues related to government in South Korea in 2018. The three issues are fine dust pollution, refugees from Yemen, and political scandal. Each issue is briefly described as follows.

First, ultrafine dust pollution is an imminent issue in South Korea. In the past, South Korea blamed China about 'yellow dust (sand)' landing on the Korean peninsula every spring. This issue was considered a seasonal trouble (French 2002), and Korea cooperated with the Chinese government to deter desertification. However, the latest air pollution shows increased levels of ultrafine dust, and air quality has plummeted in Korea. Most Koreans think China is the main cause of this pollution, which creates diplomatic tension because the Chinese government does not accept this argument (Bicker 2019). Before COVID-19, this was a priority concern among Korean people. The issue was highlighted during the 2018 local elections, and candidates pledged a variety of measures to decrease the ultrafine dust level (Yoo 2018).

Second, the arrival of the Yemeni refugees has sparked controversial debate in South Korea. The government does not regularly accept refugees into the country, and it has fastidious and complex Refugee Status Determination Procedures. The acceptance rate is exceptionally low. According to the Korean Immigration Service, the number of applicants in 2018 was 16,173, whereas the number of accepted refugees was only 66, making the acceptance rate under 1% (Ministry of Justice 2018). South Korea is the first East Asian country to enact the Refugee Law (Borowiec 2013), but the institutional procedure is not welcoming refugees and Korean public opinion on accepting the refugees is negative. Thus, the arrival of over 500 Yemeni refugees in Korea has been controversial. Because of the civil war in Yemen, asylum seekers have tried to come to Korea since 2016 but in 2018, due to Jeju Island's visa-waiver policy, the number of Yemeni refugees increased rapidly and brought wildfire backlashes from Korean publics.

Third, online comment manipulation from an influential blogger became a serious political issue in 2018. After successfully impeaching the corrupt president Park, Geun-Hye, Korean citizens partook in an early presidential election in 2017. The newly elected president, Moon, Jae-In declared that he would terminate the wrong-headed and obsolete legacy of deceit in his new government. In March, however, members of Moon's party, the Democratic Party, were accused of online opinion rigging using macro program tactics (Kim 2018). This scandal was called the 'Druking scandal' after the leader of this manipulation crime, Kim, Dong-Won, whose nickname in the blog was "Druking." It endangered the legitimacy of the new government, whose main platform was transparent governance. The Blue House and the Democratic Party asserted that they were also victims of the scandal and that they had nothing to do with the manipulation (Yoon and Park 2018).

6.2. Measurement

The questions in the survey were generally adapted from existing scales. All of items in this study were rated on a 7-point bipolar Likert-type scale (From 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree).

Government–Citizen Relationship (GCR)

To measure GPR quality, this study adapted the scale from a previous study by Chon (2019). This GPR scale is based on organization-public relationships (OPR) items from Hon and Grunig (1999) as well as items of organization-public relationship assessment (OPRA, Huang 2001). This scale has four indicators: trust (6 items), including "government treats citizens like me fairly and justly;" control mutuality (4 items), including "My government and citizens like me are attentive to what each other say;" commitment (4 items), including "I feel that my government is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to citizen like me;" and satisfaction (4 items), including "Most citizens like me are happy in their interaction with government" ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.29$, $\alpha = .97$).

Government Trust on Given Issues

Citizens' trust on given issues was measured using two items taken from Chen et al. (2017) government trust scale. The items were "the government can be relied on to keep its promise related to the issues" and "I feel very confident about the government's skills to deal with the issues." ($M = 4.15$, $SD = .81$, $\alpha = .92$).

Problem Recognition, Involvement Recognition, and Constraint Recognition

These three situational variables adapted from previous STOPS research are modified slightly to fit this study (Kim and Grunig 2011). The variables were measured by four items each. For example, problem recognition includes "I was surprised when I heard about this issue" ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .92$). Involvement recognition includes "I recognize a strong connection between myself and a given issue" ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.22$, $\alpha = .93$). Constraint recognition includes "I can make a difference regarding a given issue" ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .92$). Items of constraint recognition were revised in this study.

Engagement in political conversations

This study conceptualizes engagement in political conversation by adapting information-forwarding variables of STOPS. In STOPS, there are six communicative behaviors, and information forwarding is one of information transmission behaviors (Kim and Grunig 2011). As active communicative behaviors, information forwarding refers to communicative behaviors of a person who wants to proactively and voluntarily spread the information to solve a given problem. Unlike other communicative behaviors, information-forwarding behavior makes people active in problem-solving processes via collective action in mobilizing others for problem solving (Ni and Kim 2009). In this study, engagement in political conversation means a person's active communicative action to voluntarily participate in political conversation related to three issues. The issues were measured by three items each, including "I talk about my opinions on this issue with my friends and coworkers" ($M = 2.55$, $SD = 1.08$, $\alpha = .89$).

7. Results

Using IBM's SPSS 26.0, this study conducted data analyses for hypotheses in the current study. Before running hierarchical and multiple regression analyses, correlation analyses were conducted to get a first view on the associations of the variables. Table 1 shows a complete overview of the means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations of all the variables including control variables such as gender, age, and income. To examine hypotheses posed in this study, we conducted regression analyses by controlling demographic variables. Before regression analysis, correlations of variables are suggested in Table 1.

Table 1 - Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender[a]	0.49	0.50	1.00	0.02	-0.02	-0.09	0.02	-0.02	-.245**	-.163**	0.01
2. Age	40.04	11.01	0.02	1.00	-0.03	.137*	.159**	-0.03	0.02	-.165**	-0.06
3. Income	5.86	2.75	-0.02	-0.03	1.00	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.08	0.10	0.09
4. Government-Citizen Relationship	3.70	1.29	-0.09	.137*	0.01	1.00	.599**	.190**	-0.06	0.02	-.466**
5. Issue-Specific Trust	4.15	0.81	0.02	.159**	0.05	.599**	1.00	.179**	0.12	0.02	-.420**
6. Active-Political Conversation	2.56	1.08	-0.02	-0.03	0.03	.190**	.179**	1.00	.246**	.436**	-.385**
7. Problem Recognition	4.90	1.06	-.245**	0.02	0.08	-0.06	0.12	.246**	1.00	.471**	-.171**
8. Involvement Recognition	4.34	1.22	-.163**	-.165**	0.10	0.02	0.02	.436**	.471**	1.00	-.258**
9. Constraint Recognition	4.72	1.14	0.01	-0.06	0.09	-.466**	-.420**	-.385**	-.171**	-.258**	1.00

Note. [a] Male = 1, female = 0, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

7.1. Public Engagement Hypothesis (H1)

H1 sought to test whether government-citizen relationship increases citizens' political conversation on national issues. To explore H1, hierarchical regression was conducted. The results of the hierarchical regression analysis in Table 2 indicate that the total model testing citizens' political conversation on national issues with government-citizen relationship is significant, $F_{(4, 274)} = 2.77$, $p < .05$, and explains 4% of the variance. In step 1 of the regression model, control variables were not significant predictor for the dependent variable. As expected, a positive relationship, however, was established between government-citizen relationship and citizens' political conversation on national issues in Step 2, showing that citizens who have positive relationship with government are more likely to engage with political conversation related to national issues ($\beta = .20$, $p < .01$). Thus, H1 was supported.

7.2. Public Empowerment and Relationship Values Hypotheses

H2 aimed to test if government-citizen relationship increases citizens' issue-specific trust on government. To explore H2, hierarchical regression was conducted. As shown in Table 3, total model testing citizens' political conversation on national issues with government-citizen relationship is significant, $F_{(4, 274)} = 40.15$, $p < .001$, and explains .37% of the variance. In Step 1 of the regression model, age was a positive predictor of

citizens' issue-specific trust on government (β = .16, p < .01). Controlling gender, age, and income variables, government-citizen relationship in Step 2 was positively associated with citizens' issue-specific trust on government (β = .60, p < .001). Hence, H2 was supported, showing that the relationship quality between government and its citizens plays an important role in predicting issue-specific trust on government. Accordingly, citizens who have good relationship with government tend to trust government's ability to deal with national issues.

Table 2 - Regression Coefficients of Government-Citizen Relationship on Active-Political Conversation of National Issues

Variables	Step 1			Step 2		
	b	β	*SE*	*b*	β	*SE*
Constant	2.62		0.29	2.10		0.33
Gender [a]	-0.03	-0.02	0.13	0.00	0.00	0.13
Age	0.00	-0.03	0.01	-0.01	-0.05	0.01
Income	0.01	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02
Government-Citizen Relationship				0.17**	0.20	0.05
R^2		.00			.04	
ΔR^2					.04	

Note. N = 275, We examined the impact of government-citizen relationship on active-political conversation. In Model 1., we entered the control variables of gender, age, and income to predict active-political conversation. In Model 2, we entered government-citizen relationship as a predictor. [a] Male = 1, female = 0, *** *p* < .001, ** *p* < .01, * *p* < .05.

H3 predicted a positive relationship between citizens' issue-specific trust on government and constraint recognition of given issues. In order to shed light on the relationship, heretical regression was employed. Table 4 showed that H3 was significant, F (4, 274) = 15.88, p < .001, explaining 19% of the variance. In step 1 of the regression model, control variables were not associated with out dependent variable. As expected, however, a positive relationship was established between citizens' issue-specific trust on constraint recognition in Step 2, showing that citizens who tend to trust government on given issues are less likely to perceive obstacles to be engaged in the issues (β = -.43, p < .001). Thus, H3 was supported.

7.3. Serenity Effect: Trust Effect to Reduced Issue Concern of Citizens

H4 was to examine if citizens' issue-specific trust on government is negative association with problem recognition (H4a) and involvement recognition (H4b) -- public serenity effect about the issues. To explore the hypotheses, multiple regression was conducted by controlling gender, age, and income. In Table 4, regression model of H4a shows that with government-citizen relationship citizens' issue-specific trust on problem recognition is significant but opposite to the prediction, F (4, 274) = 5.9, p < .001, and explains 8% of the variance. Citizens' issue-specific trust on government increase significant problem recognition of citizens toward three issues (β = .12, p < .05). H4a to predict negative relationship between citizens' issue-specific trust on government and involvement recognition of citizens on given issues was not significant (β = .04, p = .49). In this regression model, gender (β = -.16, p < .01) and age (β = -.17, p < .01) were significant factors to positively

predict involvement recognition of citizens on national issues. Thus, both H4a and H4b were not supported in this study.

Table 3 - Regression Coefficients of Government-Citizen Relationship on Issue-Specific Trust toward Government

Variables	Step 1			Step 2		
	b	β	SE	b	β	SE
Constant	3.56		0.22	2.39		0.20
Gender [a]	0.03	0.02	0.10	0.12	0.08	0.08
Age	0.01**	0.16	0.00	0.01	0.08	0.00
Income	0.02	0.06	0.02	0.01	0.05	0.01
Government-Citizen Relationship				0.37***	0.60	0.03
R^2		.03			.37	
Δ R^2					.34	

Note. N = 275, We examined the impact of government-citizen relationship on issue-specific trust toward government. In Model 1., we entered the control variables of gender, age, and income to predict active-political conversation. In Model 2, we entered government-citizen relationship as a predictor. [a] Male = 1, female = 0, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Table 4 - Regression Coefficients of Issue-Specific Trust toward Government to Predict Constraint Recognition

Variables	Step 1			Step 2		
	b	Step 2	SE	b	β	SE
Constant	4.73		0.31	6.86		0.39
Gender [a]	0.03	0.01	0.14	0.05	0.02	0.12
Age	-0.01	-0.06	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01
Income	0.04	0.09	0.02	0.05*	0.12	0.02
Issue-Specific Trust toward Government				-0.60***	-0.43	0.08
R^2		.00			.19	
Δ R^2					.18	

Note. N = 275, We examined the impact of issue-specific trust toward government on constraint recognition. In Model 1., we entered the control variables of gender, age, and income to predict active-political conversation. In Model 2, we entered issue-specific trust toward government as a predictor. [a] Male = 1, female = 0, *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

8. Discussion

Public-sector organizations require public attention and communicative actions in their working processes. The attention and actions are critical assets to legitimize efforts and mobilize needed resources. However, indifferent publics and the operational nature of involving an entire population can paralyze public-sector organizations in demanding social challenges. For example, in the time of COVID-19, almost all governments and health institutions struggle to involve indifferent publics in the problem-solving process. Thus, it is essential for public-sector organizations to increase citizens' participations.

The purpose of this study was to examine three hypotheses about public engagement effect, government empowerment effect, and public serenity effect. Using three national issues in South Korea, the results of this study showed that public engagement effect and government empowerment effect were significant, whereas public serenity effect was partially supported. That is, the findings illustrate strategic values of government-citizen relationship on public engagement, empowerment, and serenity to enhance participatory democracy, facilitating public-sector communication.

In the present study, three sets of theoretical hypotheses attest the conditions of participatory democracy – public engagement and public empowerment. The virtues of democracy are possible when citizens participate in public spheres (Habermas 1989) and engage actively in social or national issues affecting their lives (Kim, Wyatt, and Katz 1999). However, citizens' uniform participation is not only infrequent but also limited for individual citizens according to perceived personal, social, and political efficacy (McCluskey, Deshpande, Shah, and McLeod 2004). There is no immediate solution. For good or bad, people exert control over their cognitive and communicative actions. However, this study asked whether there are still useful strategies for public-sector leaders and management to lessen such challenges. Cultivating quality relationships with citizens over time could be a way for citizens to become aware and active publics regarding critical social problems. People who experience quality relationships with government or public institutions are likely to open their perceptual and cognitive gates. Of indifferent citizens, however, merely 17% increase their communication for the same social problems. Relationships convert nonchalant citizens into publics attending and talking about important social problems.

Additionally, quality relationships between citizens and governments tend to develop greater trust for government handling of national issues and social problems. Long-term relationships – having greater trust, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction with government – lead to greater confidence (37%) among citizens for governmental efforts in issues management. Further, trust on issues management efforts decreases citizens' constraint recognition up to 60%. The situational theory of problem solving explains that the lower the perceived obstacles a person sees in a problematic situation, the greater their epistemic readiness for the situation and thus their communicative actions in problem solving. This is the empowerment effect of trust and relationships.

In this vein, relationships with publics and citizens are invisible but critical assets in public-sector communication. Public-sector communicators could resolve dilemmas of low citizen participation to some extent by prioritizing strategic connections. Our study provides a closer look into the engagement and empowerment of publics in social and national affairs.

Our expectations for public serenity effect in H4a and H4b were partially supported. H4a was supported to test the relationship between issue-specific trust and problem recognition, but H4b was not supported to examine the relationship between issue-specific trust and involvement recognition. However, the findings are notable to discuss. We anticipated that as members of publics awarded greater trust in governmental issues management, they would perceive less involvement recognition. It turned out that higher trust toward governmental issues management increased the sense of problem seriousness but did not change their perceived connections to the issues. This in part suggests that public engagement effect is greater than public calming-down effect. Problem-specific trust for public-sector organizations leads citizens to more participatory paths – talking about the national problems and social issues.

While we are cautious to generalize such patterns and it is premature to conclude, the value of citizen relationships with government (public-sector institution) and trust on governmental issues-management efforts make it easier for public institutions to increase public attention toward desired problems that is to create aware publics for the issues of their concern.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Despite significant findings, there are several limitations to be investigated in the future research. First, all three topics were major issues in South Korea. Thus, it is difficult to generalize the results of this study. Future studies should test all three hypotheses in different cultures and contexts (e.g., western countries) to increase validity. Second, the sample of this study was collected from an online panel in South Korea. This could limit the generalizability of the results in that respondents in the online survey were self-selected populations that do not represent whole population of South Korea. Third, although one of the issues was related to a political issue, partisanship and ideology were not controlled. Future research should consider those control variables in testing the hypotheses on a political issue.

10. Conclusion

The rising stakes and risks associated with social problems demonstrate not only the importance of public-sector communication but also the difficulties for public-sector communicators. In the present study, we detailed two important effects that enable participatory democracy -- engagement and empowerment of publics and public-sector organizations from long-term quality relationships that organizations have developed with strategic constituencies (e.g., citizens).

The examined hypotheses and effects delineate the specific conditions by which people become concerned publics and engage with problems affecting their lives. The relationships that government or other institutions cultivate increase public participatory conversations on the problems or issues – public engagement effect. Public-sector communication becomes more effective as people seek, select, and share their ideas and opinions around the issues. To help with this, important information (e.g., safety guidelines) could be sought out and shared among citizens. Additionally, quality relationships could empower public-sector institutions as publics award greater trust and confidence to managing efforts of challenging issues.

In this study, we deployed communication theories, including the situational theory of problem solving, on the nature of publics and theory of relationship in strategic public relations, aka the Excellence theory of communication management, for the values of relationships to issues management and public engagement. The testing hypotheses and the results added theoretical insights and improve intellectual practice for public-sector communicators by clarifying two challenges unique to the public-sector –1) how to discern subpublics in a problem (a challenge from motivational differences among citizens) and 2) how to characterize the public-sector communication situation and its nature including the creation of issue publics (a normative challenge requiring communicating with the entirety of population). The road to participatory democracy will still be rocky. However, institutions and citizens can improve public spheres and deliberate participatory democracy through quality relationships they build.

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