Connecting the dots: A bibliometric review of Habermasian theory in public relations research

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Abstract

Purpose: Meta reviews are central for mapping the state of the field, consolidating the heterogeneous public relations body of knowledge, and pointing to new potential research directions. Habermas is one of the most influential contemporary social theorists and his work has repeatedly been used in public relations scholarship. While some have maintained that his work has been most influential in the development of public relations theory, this stream of research has never been reviewed empirically.

Design/methodology/approach: In this paper, we present a bibliometric literature review of 263 research articles published between 1980 and 2016. A network analysis of these publications based on the technique of bibliographic coupling was used to identify common forms of application, research themes, as well as patterns of impact.

Findings: Results show that the use of Habermas has grown significantly, specifically in the recent decade. At the same time, researchers have a narrow focus specifically on earlier developments in the theory. Finally, we discover three main topical research clusters that have been influenced by the theory: public relations and the public sphere, dialogic stakeholder relationships, as well as public relations and communication ethics.

Originality/value: Our findings map out an important stream of scholarship in the field by showing where public relations scholars have been and where the research community has not ventured yet. Based on the results of this analysis we propose directions for research to advance future theory development in public relations using Habermas' work.

Key words: Critical theory; Habermas; public sphere; discourse; discourse ethics; communicative action; meta analysis; bibliometrics

1. Introduction

As an academic discipline, public relations needs an understanding of how the practice works in and for society, and how it is influenced by and influences social structures. Issues of trust and legitimacy, as well as public discourse and ethics are arguably important for the field and, during the last decade, social theory has increasingly been used to address these topics in public relations research (Holtzhausen, 2012; Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2018; L'Etang, McKie, Snow, & Xifra, 2016).

One obvious source for such scholarship is the extensive work of social theorist Jürgen Habermas, who is among the most influential scholars within social theory today (see e.g., Elliott & Lemert, 2014). With the strong focus on concepts such as discourse, deliberation, legitimacy and the public sphere, it is not surprising that the significance of Habermas' works also extends to the field of public relations, and especially the critical vein of the field. Early on, his works have been deemed "extremely important for a theory of public relations" (Pearson, 1989, p. 73) and are seen as providing a "profound theoretical basis from which to reflect on [...] different functions of public relations in society, or different communicative styles of public relations" (Bentele & Wehmeier, 2009, p. 247). Indeed, public relations scholars have repeatedly cited Habermas' theories. However, the question of how Habermas' theory has been utilized in public relations research has produced quite contradictory answers. A little over 20 years ago, Nessmann (1995, p. 153) claimed that "Habermas' thoughts on the topics of symmetrical communication, discourse, mutual understanding, dialog, and consensus" have been "particularly influential in the development of PR theory". Others have maintained that Habermas' extensive oevre has hardly been utilized

systematically for public relations research (Zerfaß, 2010, p. 62). However, none of these extant assessments present empirical evidence. Still today, as Benson (2008) pointed out a decade ago, the substantial corpus of public relations research that references Habermas' work has received no systematic attention from a meta perspective.

As stressed by Botan & Taylor (2004), meta review studies of the academic literature in public relations are an important part of mapping the state of the field, consolidating the heterogeneous body of knowledge, and further developing public relations theory. In this vein, our paper aims to assess the influence of Habermasian critical theory in the wider domain of public relations research, show what topical research clusters this theory has influenced, and show the impact that this research has had. To this aim, we conduct a bibliometric review of the scholarly public relations literature. The analysis of 263 journal articles suggests that the use of Habermas in public relations scholarship has grown significantly in recent years. Furthermore, it reveals a narrow and selective focus in applying Habermas' concepts, and shows the emergence of three interrelated research clusters (focusing on the public sphere, dialogic stakeholder relationships, and communication ethics) with varying research impact.

As such, the study makes three main contributions: First, it systematically maps research that draws on Habermas and, thus, helps consolidate the body of knowledge by identifying within it the overarching trends and commonalities. Second, it shows the level of recognition of these works and makes visible their respective points of connection with the various concepts and themes from Habermas' works. Finally, by highlighting so far neglected areas that have potential for future application, the paper raises new arguments that can widen the spectrum of consideration and stimulate further discussion on the application of Habermasian critical theory in the field of public relations research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Habermasian Critical Theory in Public Relations Research

Habermas has presented an extensive social theory on par with scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault or Anthony Giddens (cf. Joas, 2009) – see Table 1 for a chronology of main works and central concepts as well as Powell (2013) for a concise review of the theory. Coarsely speaking, one of the main characteristics of Habermas' work is the

strong normativity of the core concept of communicative action (Habermas, 1984). He positions communicative action as distinct to other concepts of social action, such as teleological action (objective realization of goals), normative action (social adherence to shared values), or dramaturgical action (subjective self-expression). Communicative action, is generally oriented to reaching understanding (Kim, 2011), because actors inevitably raise fundamental validity claims (Niemi, 2005), which others may challenge: Namely, any communicator must claim that what has been said is objectively true (with respect to the objective world about which true statements are possible), normatively right (with respect to the social world of value-regulated interpersonal relations), and expressively truthful (with respect to the subjective world of inner experiences). Even if an actor is not oriented toward understanding, he or she would, nonetheless, raise all three validity claims to *pretend* that the presuppositions of normal communicative action are satisfied (Habermas, 1984, pp. 332-333). The fact that validity claims are, as such, inevitably raised leads Habermas to suggest that a) all other forms of social action (such as competition, conflict, or strategic action) are merely derivates of communicative action, and b) that communicative action essentially constitutes reflexivity: the fact that actors cannot but mutually raise validity claims for their utterances is an implicit reference to rational discourse that is built into communicative action (Habermas, 2006, p. 413). Based on his concepts of communicative action and rationality, Habermas has written extensively on topics such as ethics, the public sphere, political discourse and deliberation, and legitimation (cf. Table 1).

Book	*Year*	*Focal theoretical concepts*
The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere	*1962* (1989)	Public sphere, Deliberation, Legitimation, Refeudalization, Transformation (of the public sphere)
Knowledge and Interest	1968 (1972)	Epistemology of social science
Communication and the Evolution of Society	1976 (1979)	Speech Act, Discourse, Legitimation, Deliberation
The Theory of Communicative Action 1	1981 (1984)	Communicative action, Speech Act, Formal pragmatics, Validity claims, Ideal speech situation,
The Theory of Communicative Action 2	1981 (1987)	lifeworld & system, Legitimation, Colonialization of the lifeworld

Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action	1983 (1990)	Communicative action, Validity claims, Ideal speech situation, Universalization/universality, Discourse ethics, Consensus, Formal pragmatics
Justification and Application	1991 (1994)	Formal pragmatics, Communicative action, Validity claims, Ideal speech situation, Universalization/universality, Discourse ethics, Consensus, Formal pragmatics
Between Facts and Norms	1992 (1996)	Formal pragmatics, Discourse, Legitimation, Deliberation
The Inclusion of the Other	1996 (1998)	Formal pragmatics, Discourse, Deliberation, Legitimation
The Post-National Constellation	1998 (2001)	Formal pragmatics, Discourse, Deliberation, Legitimation
Truth and Justification	1999 (2003)	Validity claims, Ideal speech situation, Universalization/universality, Discourse ethics, Consensus, Formal pragmatics

Table 1 Major Works and Key Concepts (Year of English Translation in Parentheses).

Habermas' concepts have been used in public relations research to analyze diverse topics such as transparency (Yuthas et al., 2002), accountability and legitimacy (Buhmann et al., 2019; Meisenbach and Feldner, 2007), corporate social responsibility communication (Elving, Golob, Podnar, Nielsen, & Thomson, 2015; Reynolds & Yuthas, 2008; Seele & Lock, 2015), reputation (Eisenegger & Imhof, 2008), publics and the public sphere (Jensen, 2001; Leitch & Neilson, 2001; Ramsey, 2015; Self, 2010), corporate branding (Kernstock & Brexendorf, 2009), public relations ethics (Fawkes, 2012; Leeper, 1996; Meisenbach, 2006; Pearson, 1989), dialogue (Pieczka, 2015; Raaz & Wehmeier, 2015) and the relationship between public relations and journalism (Salter, 2005). These applications suggest a broad interest in Habermas' theories as well as a diverse applicability in terms of research topics.

While it is undisputed that Habermas received ample attention in public relations scholarship and that his theory made a mark on the field, there is no clear picture of the magnitude and width of this impact. We do lack a clear and comprehensive view of how different concepts from Habermas' vast oeuvre have been applied and how they have impacted public relations

scholarship. Thus, the following research questions are posed: How widely has Habermas been taken up in public relations research (RQ1)? Which of Habermas' works and concepts are applied (and which are not) (RQ2)? What topical fields within public relations research have been influenced by Habermas theories (RQ3)? And what degree of impact and recognition has been garnered by the public relations research that cites Habermas (RQ4)?

2.2 A Bibliometric Approach to Review Public Relations Research

The research questions posed in this study are commonly approached by means of bibliometric analyses, which is the quantitative study of publishing and citation patterns (Otlet, 1934; Pritchard, 1969; Rousseau, 2014). It can be used to identify pivotal articles within a field and illustrate connections between different works regarding their topical focus, use of specific theories or methods (Glänzel, 1996) or to provide an indication of the relative influence of particular papers within a field (Aaen-Stockdale, 2017). All bibliometric reviews are based on the assumption that "researchers publish their most important findings in scholarly journals and predominantly base their research on articles previously published in similar journals" (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012, p. 735). While the approach originated in the natural sciences (Garfield, 1955; Price, 1963), it is now a popular form of analysis in many humanities and social science disciplines such as marketing and advertising (J. Kim & McMillan, 2008; Pasadeos, Phelps, & Kim, 1998) or management research (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Bachrach, 2008).

Bibliometric reviews have also widely been conducted in the public relations literature, namely to map the field in general (Pasadeos, Berger, & Renfro, 2010; Pasadeos & Renfro, 1992; Pasadeos, Renfro, & Hanily, 1999), to analyze the use of theory and methods (Cutler, 2004; Morton & Lin, 1995; Sallot, Lyon, Acosta-Alzuru, & Jones, 2003), and to identify and map specific research streams within the field, such as on online public relations (Ye & Ki, 2012), consumer brand relationships (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2015), crisis communication (S. Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009), organization public relationships (Ki & Shin, 2006), public diplomacy (Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2016), corporate branding (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012), or trust (David, 2007). Regardless of the growing importance of social theory in the field, there is today no such meta review that evaluates the use of any of such theory in the public relations literature.

3. Method

3.1 Data Collection

In our bibliometric review, the unit of analysis was the published peer-reviewed research article with a focus on public relations. We focus on English language journal articles as they are the most widely used and cited text form in this line of research (Pasadeos et al., 2010). A bibliography of relevant articles was compiled by conducting searches in academic databases (*Web of Science, JSTOR, Ebsco, Science Direct, Sage)*. Criteria for inclusion were that an article mentioned Habermas at least once and that it had a topical focus on public relations. We applied a relatively broad understanding of public relations in that all articles published in the seven major academic journals of the public relations research domain (*Public Relations Review, Journal of Public Relations Research, Journal of Communication Management, Public Relations Inquiry, International Journal of Strategic Communication, Corporate Communications: An International Journal, Corporate Reputation Review*) were considered, by default, to have a focus on public relations (In the following analyses we will refer to this group as "PR journals"). Further, articles published elsewhere had to have at least one of the following words in the title, introduction, abstract, or keywords: "public relations", "communication management", "corporate communication".

3.2 Coding Scheme

Standard categories of meta data gathered in review studies in the public relations domain (c.f. e.g. Pasadeos et al., 2010; Vanc & Fitzpatrick, 2016) were applied, namely: author names, institutional affiliation, year of publication, and article type. Additionally, we extend this focus to answer our specific research questions, also looking at cited original publications from Habermas, used concepts from Habermas, as well as recognition/impact of publications in the form of citations. To include these dimensions, we applied common indicators used in bibliometric studies analyzing influence patterns of authors within academic fields (Johnston, 2009; Tsay, 2009) – see Table 2 for an overview.

3.3 Reliability

To test for intercoder reliability, a pretest was conducted on 10 percent of randomly selected articles in the corpus. For the standard categories (name of journal, author names, institutional affiliation, year of publication, and article type) Holsti's intercoder reliability was 1.0. The reliability was also at 1.0 for author institution. Good agreement was achieved for Habermas name counts (.871), citations of Habermas' seminal works (.815), and mentions of Habermas' key concepts (.719). On average, this constitutes a substantial agreement between the coders (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Dimension	Indicators	Analysis
Publication focus	Number of citations of Habermas' seminal publications	As citations represent a relationship between the cited and citing document, we use this indicator to show which of Habermas' publications (books and articles) are referenced.
Concept focus	Number of mentions of Habermas' key concepts	This indicator allows us to show patterns in the conceptual focus of articles referring to Habermas. While some concepts (e.g., "communicative action" or "ideal speech situation") can be clearly and easily attributed to Habermas, others (e.g., "discourse" or "consensus") may be used in many contexts. To assure only coding the use of Habermasian concepts, we looked at the context in which the terms appeared in an article and only coded those mentions that clearly used a concept in the Habermasian sense.
Recognition	Number of citations in *Web of Science*	Number of citations that an article receives can serve as a proxy for its importance (van Aalst, 2010). In our analysis it serves as a basis to indicate the *external recognition* (in the wider field) of articles that apply Habermas' theory.
	Normalized citations	For a more nuanced interpretation we normalize the number of citations according to year of publication and field.

Table 2 Overview of Additional Dimensions and Indicators.

3.4 Network analysis

To assess the coherence and prominence of public relations research that references Habermas, the papers from the corpus that were indexed in the citation database *Web of Science* were subjected to a citation network analysis. Although coverage of social sciences fields is arguably better in other citation databases such as *Google Scholar* (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016), the data is less reliable, fewer bibliometric tools are available and validating the data currently requires extensive manual involvement (Mingers & Meyer, 2017). Using *Web of Science* data allowed us to carry out a network analysis of these publications and identify common themes based on the technique of bibliographic coupling (Kessler, 1963). Briefly, bibliographic coupling links papers together based on the similarity of their reference lists. Two papers that cite a large proportion of the same papers will be closely associated, whether they cite each other or not. Papers that are closely associated with each other are then grouped together as a cluster. This has proven to be an accurate method by which a fields of research can be mapped or visualized (Boyack & Klavans, 2010). In addition to mapping the field according to common themes, we also determined the level at which these papers are cited by other research articles, thereby providing a measure of their prominence, or external recognition. For both these analyses we used the network analysis software *VOSviewer* (van Eck & Waltman, 2010).

4. Results

4.1 The Uptake of Habermas in Public Relations Research

We identified 263 articles in 59 scholarly journals between 1980 and 2016 linking public relations research and Habermas. Our first research question aimed at uncovering the level of interest in Habermas as a reference theorist in the field. The first ever mention of Habermas in the corpus of public relations research is a cursory reference in a 1980 overview article on activism (Walker, 1980). After this, the uptake in the public relations domain does not start until the late 1980s with Pearson's (1989) application of discourse ethics and Schreyögg and Steinmann's (1989) work on public protest and corporate response. From this point onward, citations to Habermas in the public relations literature increase linearly at a rate of almost 40% per year. However, an important question to address is whether this is simply a result of

the general growth of the number of articles within the wider public relations field. Figure 1 shows the research papers referencing Habermas in the context of the overall amount of published public relations research over the same period.
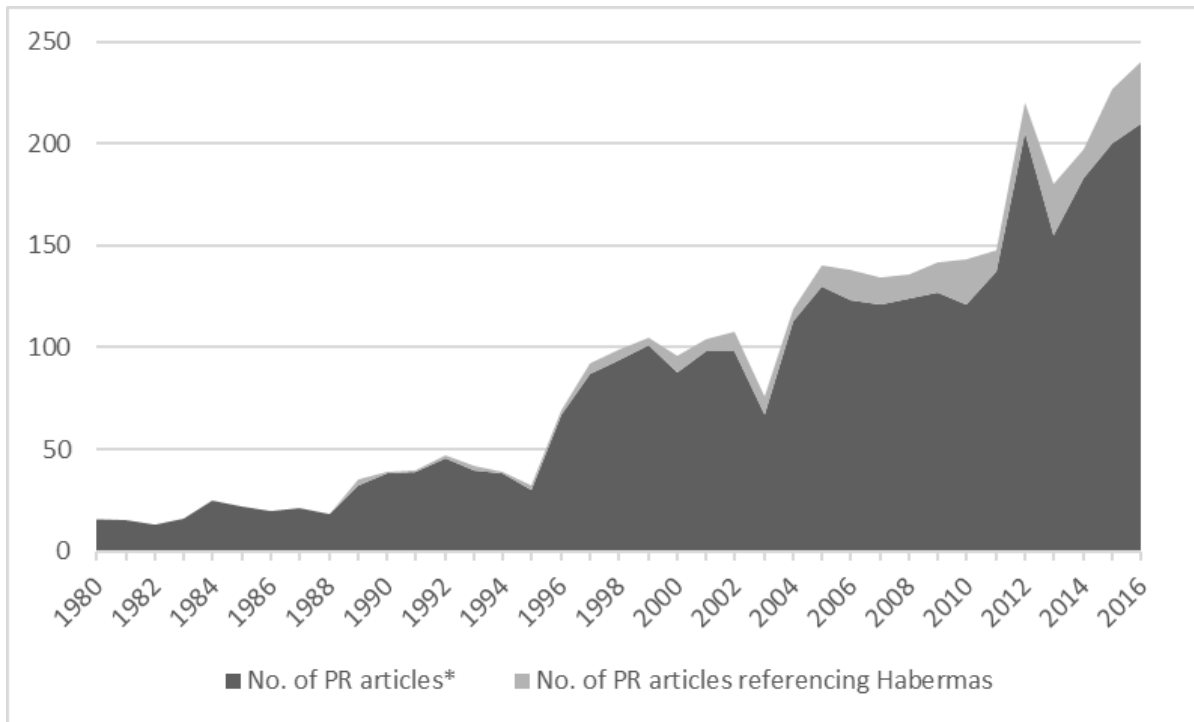

Figure 1 Number of Articles/Year (*articles in PR journals).

While the increase in number of public relations papers over this period mirrors the general increase in output observed in the rest of the academic literature (c.f., Bornmann & Mutz, 2015; Larsen & von Ins, 2010; Price, 1965; van Raan, 2000), the relative amount of articles citing Habermas within the field shows, however, that this proportion is clearly increasing (see Figure 2), which clearly reflects a growing relevance of Habermas' theories to the field of public relations research.
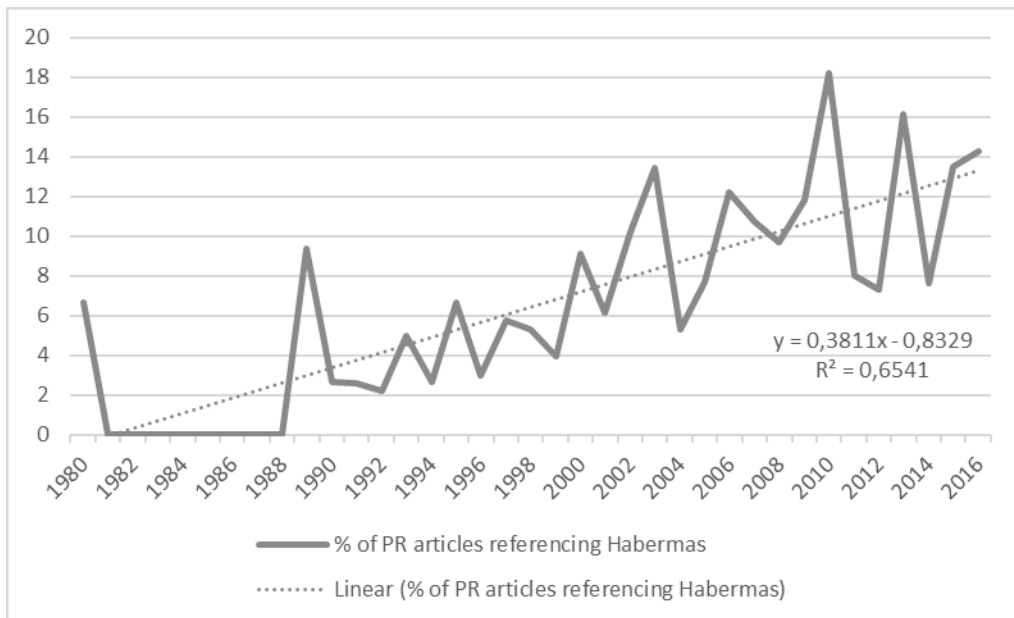
Figure 2 Percentage of PR Articles citing Habermas (PR journals only).

4.2 Points of Connection Between Public Relations Research and Habermas' Works

With regard to our second research question, the publication focus shows a clear tendency to reference texts from a very specific period of Habermas' publications: A vast majority (76 percent) of the citations concentrate on three of his works published between 1984 and 1990. These consist of the two volumes of Habermas' extensive theory of society (*Theory of Communicative Action*) as well as his influential book on *The Transformation of the Public Sphere* (published in English in 1989 with a chapter on revisions regarding the earlier German version) and his first major book on discourse ethics *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. However, important contributions from the 1990s on political theory, legitimacy, and normative models of democracy (*The Inclusion of the Other* and *Between Facts and Norms*) are so far very peripheral in public relations research, and recent work on political communication in modern media societies (Habermas, 2009) is not referenced so far. We also see that particularly two of Habermas' more recent books, namely *Justification and Application* and *Truth and Justification*, in which he comments and critically revises earlier conceptions (esp. on discourse ethics, the ideal speech situation, and consensus) have hardly received attention.

A look at concepts mirrors, in part, the narrow focus on a specific period of Habermas' work. The five most cited concepts, which make up 72 percent of all citations, are those which can be clearly associated with the three works mentioned above (c.f. also Table 1). On the level

of concepts, by far the largest share of references (23 percent) link to the concept of the public sphere followed by the central concept of communicative action as well as the group of concepts that link mainly to Habermas work on moral justification: validity claims, discourse, and discourse ethics. The work on the distinction between the lifeworld and system is interestingly not really a part of this group of the popular concepts, even though it is an important part of the main analysis in the *Theory of Communicative Action*, a work that has clearly garnered a lot of attention. Much less attention, in comparison, is paid to concepts which are central in more recent work on civil society and political communication, such as legitimation and deliberation. Clearly of marginal interest to public relations scholars so far are key foundational concepts such as formal pragmatics, universalization, or the ideal speech situation, which constitute the theoretical core and groundwork of Habermas' normative and critical theoretical work (cf. Figure 3).
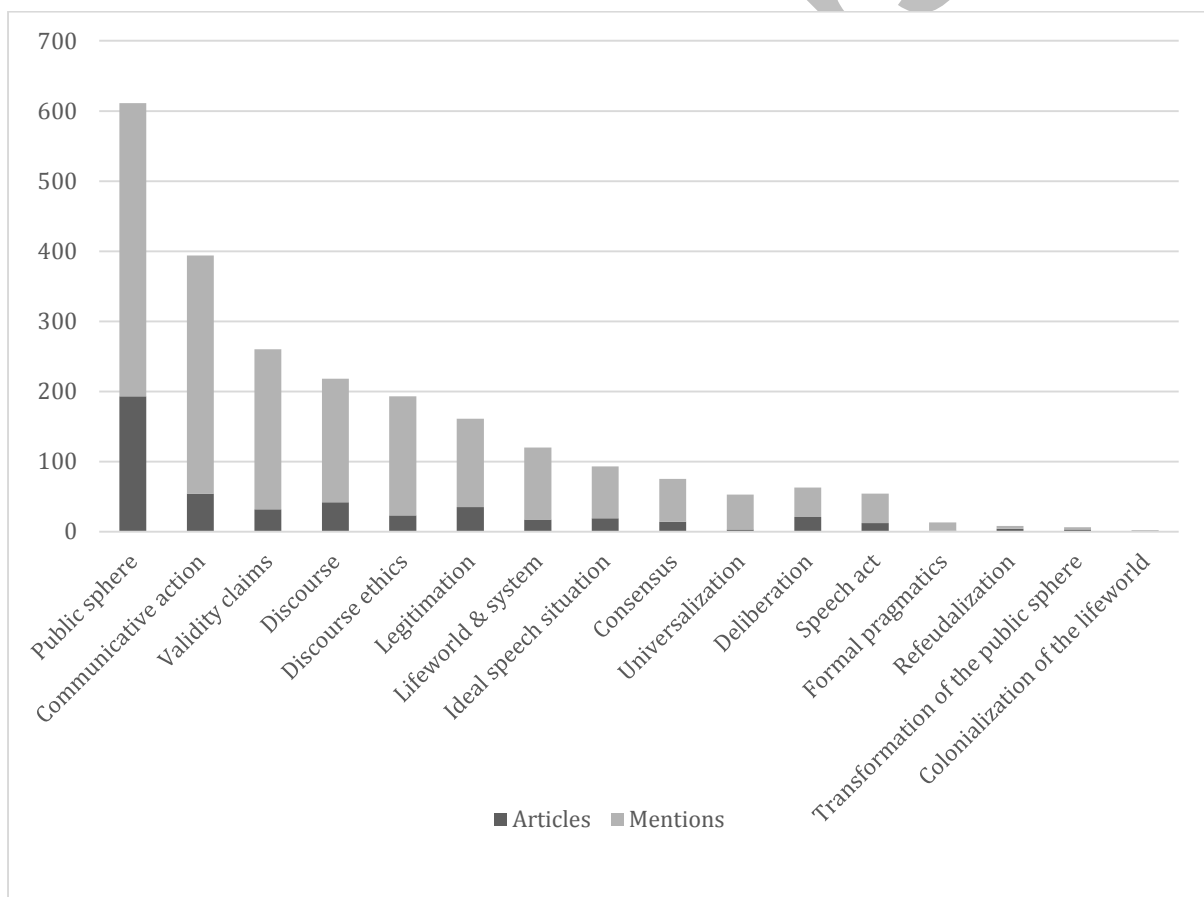

Figure 3 Use of Habermas' Key Concepts in the Public Relations Literature.

4.3 Topical Clusters of Public Relations Research Referencing Habermas

The sub-set of papers subjected to the analysis of bibliographies and citations, i.e. the one that was retrieved from the citation database *Web of Science*, consisted of 158 articles (60% of the

full corpus)—which represents a good coverage for a social science discipline within the *Web of Science's* database.

Addressing our third research question, we used bibliographic coupling (Kessler, 1963) to identify common overarching themes in the public relations research literature that refers to Habermas' works. The clustering resulted in three main clusters shown in Figure 4. For a full reference list of articles from the three citation clusters see Appendix 1.
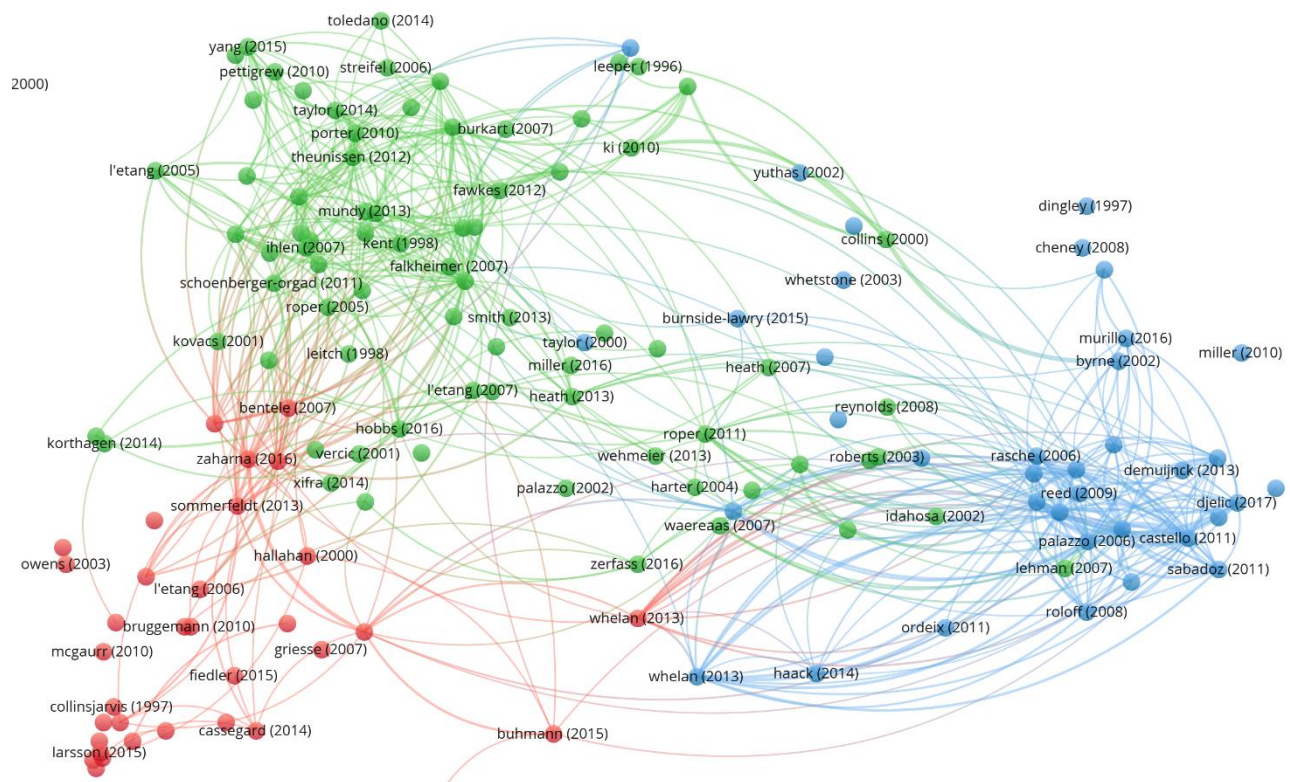

Figure 4 Clusters of Public Relations Research Articles Referencing Habermas, Identified Based on Bibliographic Coupling. Cluster 1 = red, Cluster 2 = green, Cluster 3 = blue.

The three clusters represent related fields with unique topical foci. The articles in cluster one (red) focus on subjects such as lobbying and public affairs, political publics, civil society or the role of public relations in democracy. This cluster's overarching thematic context is *public relations and the public sphere*. These related works largely have a macro focus on the role of public relations within society. In this cluster, Habermas' concepts of the public sphere, political discourse and legitimation, as well as his differentiation of lifeworld and system are the most important points of connection.

Cluster two (green), in turn, shows a focus on building *dialogic stakeholder relationships and engagement* through dialogue. The conceptual focus here is strongest on discourse and communicative action. These related works largely take a more functional and meso focus on the role of the public relations function for the organization. Compared to the others, this cluster has the weakest links to Habermas' theories as articles widely reference his work only 'in passing'—acknowledging the theoretical position rather than taking it up, discussing or applying it.

Cluster three (blue) aggregates work focused on related topics such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), legitimacy and accountability, corporate citizenship, and diversity. The thematic context of this reach is *communication ethics* with a strong emphasis on communication and, hence, the public relations function of organizations. Correspondingly, this cluster has a strong interest in the fundamental work within Habermas' writings that relate to the justification of discursive ethical theory. This is reflected in the common referencing of work on communicative action (as opposed to strategic action), validity claims, and ideal speech.

4.4 The Impact of Public Relations Research Referencing Habermas

Figure 5 shows the papers mapped in 2-dimensional space according to a bibliographic coupling algorithm (see section 3.4). The size of the circles in this diagram reflects the number of citations found within the entire database to these articles, whilst the color encodes the mean normalized citation score (MNCS) in which the number of citations to a paper are normalized relative to the average number of citations for papers in the same scientific field (defined by *Web of Science* subject categories), the same year of publication, and the same document type (i.e., article, letter, or review) (van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Waltman, Van Eck, Van Leeuwen, Visser, & Van Raan, 2011). Values less than one reflect citation performance that is below the global average for similar papers and values greater than one reflect citation rates above this average. Colors towards the red end of the spectrum have a higher normalized citation impact, whilst colors towards the blue end of the spectrum have a lower impact.
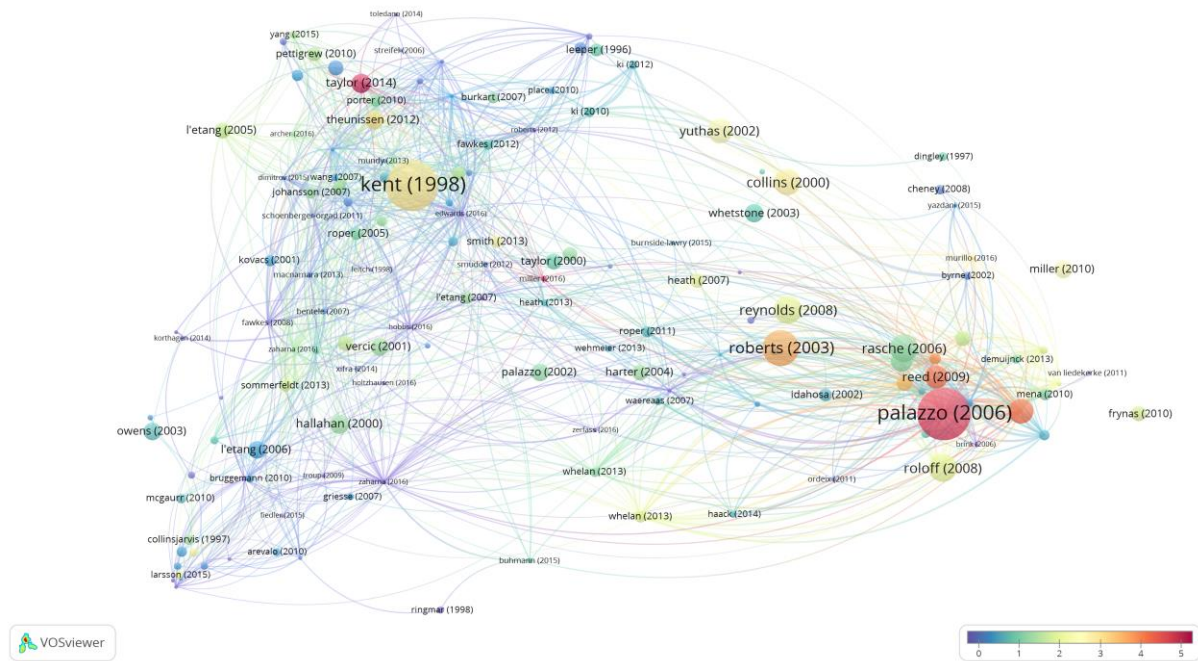
Figure 5 Impact of Public Relations Research Articles Citing Habermas

To take a concrete example, Palazzo (2006) and Kent (1998) have similar numbers of citations (313 and 292, respectively) therefore they are of a similar size. However, Palazzo (2006) has acquired those citations over a much shorter period which suggests that it is having greater impact, therefore it has a higher MNCS of 4.59 and appears as red, whilst Kent (1998) has a lower MNCS of 2.92 and appears as orange. Taylor (2014) has the highest MNCS in the whole dataset (5.33) having been cited 42 times in only four years. This analysis shows that publications with the highest impact (measured by MNCS) are located in clusters 2 and 3, with a preponderance of high-impact articles with more recent citations in cluster 3 specifically.

5. Discussion

The results show a steady increase in the number of articles in public relations research that reference Habermas' work. While this increase is paralleled by a general increase in academic public relations articles, the proportion of all public relations research articles that refer to Habermas has grown steadily. While this growth is far from the exponential growth that characterizes paradigm shifts (Aaen-Stockdale, 2017), it demonstrates a clear increase in scholarly interest in Habermas' works in the field. Furthermore, it is quite telling that the vast

majority of the more substantial and in-depth applications of Habermas' work is published only within the last decade, indicating that Habermas—who had his heydays internationally in the 1980s and 1990s—is actually just now receiving significant attention in the wider public relations domain. This very recent development should be seen in the context of a more general tendency in recent years to use social theory in public relations research (Holtzhausen, 2012; Ihlen & Fredriksson, 2018; Ihlen & Ruler, 2007). However, comparative analyses would be needed to corroborate the assumption presented elsewhere (Ihlen & Ruler, 2009), that Habermas is, in fact, *the* social theorist that has received most attention among public relations scholars—when, e.g., compared to applications of theorists such as Robert Putnam (Luoma-aho, 2009), Pierre Bourdieu (Ihlen, 2009), Michel Foucault (Motion & Leitch, 2009), or Niklas Luhmann (Holmström, 2009).

Furthermore, our results suggest that researchers have a quite narrow focus when they apply Habermas' work to public relations. This shows on three separate dimensions: concepts, study approach, and theoretical justification.

Concepts. The narrow focus on concepts means that researchers take up particular parts of Habermas' extensive writings and, within it, draw primarily on the concepts of the public sphere, communicative action, validity claims, and discourse ethics. The flipside of this common emphasis is a clear underrepresentation of other parts that are, nonetheless, valuable for public relations research. For instance, a recurring challenge for public relations research wanting to use Habermas is the relationship between the strategic and the communicative (Holtzhausen, 2010): Can public relations practitioners embrace communicative action within a profession that turns dialogues into tools for effectiveness (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012)? This tension has not been adequately addressed, although we find that communicative action is a concept that is frequently mentioned. Adding to this point, it is quite telling that many of the normative ideas about democracy are rarely in use. This includes Habermas' work on deliberation, colonization, and, especially, his two-tiered concept of lifeworld and system. As this part of his work represents the core for a critique of society, a greater focus on this part of his work would lend itself well for answering the recent calls for studies of the negative consequences of public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2013; Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012).

Another conceptual gap is the disregard of earlier work on epistemology in the social sciences (Habermas, 1972), as well as on the problem of legitimacy in advanced capitalist societies (Habermas, 1973). In the former, Habermas analyzes extant approaches in the social sciences into work serving primarily *technical* interests (functionality and control of society), *practical* needs (understanding of life-world and normative reasons), and *emancipatory* endeavors (critique of power structures). These analyses could potentially serve the debate over the prevalence or neglect of different interests (e.g. functional vs. critical) in public relations research. In the latter, Habermas analyses problems of legitimacy in modern societies, which can deliver additional points of connection to current debates on the lack of trust and legitimacy as well as post truth in public relations.

Study approach. Most applications use Habermas' work in purely theoretical arguments. Only a third of the studies work with some form of empirical evidence. This is one reason why there is currently little more to say from this perspective about the above mentioned relationship between the strategic and the communicative in public relations. Debates on this issue seem to have exhausted their theoretical ammunition and could profit from data-based insights from actual practical contexts. One potential pathway for future research would be to concentrate more on the above mentioned work (on deliberation, colonization, and lifeworld and system, but also on recent work political communication in media society), as these concepts have successfully sparked a surge of empirical work in related fields (see e.g. the contributions in *Acta politica: Special issue on deliberative democracy*, 2005) that can be inspiring for public relations research.

Theoretical justification. Most authors concentrate first and foremost on application (that is, they take Habermas' concepts at face value, rather than engaging in deeper theoretical discussion on the justification and critique of their chosen theoretical underpinnings. Fundamental concepts such as "formal pragmatics", "universalization" or the "ideal speech situation"—which constitute the theoretical core and at the same time the neuralgic points of much of the critique on Habermas' work—receive very little attention. This finding substantiates Zerfass' (2010, p. 62) earlier remark that, in order to further fructify the link between Habermas' work and public relations theory, there needs to be a greater focus on some of the fundamental philosophical and sociological questions that emerge from the theory. There is a vast secondary literature on Habermas' in sociology, philosophy, and

political science (see Corchia, 2013 for an extensive overview) that can assist public relations researchers in this endeavor.

While the insights discussed above represent the first quantitative review of the uptake of a major social theorist within the public relations field, we have to acknowledge some limitations to the approach taken here. First, we have focused on peer-reviewed English language journal articles to the exclusion of books and chapters. We argue that for a first quantitative review it is an appropriate approach, if one agrees a) with Fetscherin and Usunier (2012) that it is reasonable to assume that researchers publish their most important findings in these academic journals, and b) with Pasadeos et al. (2010) that English language journal articles are the most widely used and cited text form in public relations research. Furthermore, an advantage of this approach is that it reduces bias caused by possible redundancies from "textual recycling" which is common in books and book chapters (Bruton, 2014). Nonetheless, this approach is exclusive to important work published outside these journals and in other languages.

Another limitation is the use of citations as a proxy indicator (see e.g. Ravallion & Wagstaff, 2011 for a discussion on this). Using data on how often authors cite/mention Habermas in an article as a proxy for the relevance of Habermas for these texts may be "off" in some cases because authors indeed use citations in different ways. A basic distinction between *essential* citations, *non-essential* citations, and *negative* (negational) citations could add more nuance to such an indicator in future studies (Nicolaisen, 2007, pp. 614-615).

Finally, identified citations which are categorized as essential could be distinguished into *persuasive* citations (the author uses Habermas to contextualize the argument) and *constitutive* citations (the author uses Habermas as a core part of the argument). Such analyses would go into a more qualitative assessment which would be a welcome addition to the quantitative approach taken here. Qualitative approaches could also analyze the unique opportunities and challenges of different Habermasian concepts for answering particular research questions and for advancing theory in the field. For this, citation context analysis (Small & Greenlee, 1980) could be used, which would provide a richer picture of the specific

passage in a document that contains the reference to the theory. A qualitative approach could then also address the use and potential misuse of the theory to further deepen this discussion.

6. Conclusion

Systematic review studies of the academic literature in public relations are an important part of mapping the state of the field, consolidating the heterogeneous body of knowledge, and further developing public relations theory (Botan & Taylor, 2004). In our review of 263 journal articles between 1980 and 2016 we were able to show that: a) the use of Habermas in public relations scholarship has grown steadily, especially so within the last ten years; b) researchers so far have a strikingly narrow focus regarding concepts, study approach, and theoretical justification when they apply Habermas' work; and c) from the work referencing Habermas have emerged three main thematic research clusters on public relations and the public sphere, dialogic stakeholder relationships and engagement, as well as communication ethics – the latter of which can be shown to have both the strongest and most recent impact in terms of citations.

We started out by arguing that public relations as an academic field needs approaches that help theorize the social context of the practice. Habermas provides important and ample theoretical tools in this regard, as evidenced by the growing uptake within the field. He is indeed seen as crucial theorist, most importantly because of his extensive work on the public sphere, communicative action, and discourse ethics. These works are useful when studying, for instance, processes of public argumentation, conflict, and justification. Understanding how to make, evaluate, and justify claims of validity might be more important than ever, given tendencies towards fragmentation of society through, for instance, the decline of traditional news media readership and echo chambers on the Internet (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014). However, another main conclusion from our analysis is that public relations scholars have ignored other and also newer developments in the theories of Habermas. This selective focus is crucial because it suggests that some analytical potential remains unused, specifically with regard to issues of public deliberation and legitimacy in public relations.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 Reference List of Articles from the Citation Clusters

Cluster 1

Arevalo, JA, Critical reflective organizations: an empirical observation of global active citizenship and green politics, Journal of Business Ethics, 96(2), 299-316, 2010

Bentele, G; Wehmeier, S, Applying sociology to public relations: a commentary, Public Relations Review, 33(3), 294-300, 2007

Bruggemann, M, Information policy and the public sphere EU communications and the promises of dialogue and transparency, Javnost-The Public, 17(1), 5-22, 2010

Buhmann, A; Ingenhoff, D, The 4D model of the country image: an integrative approach from the perspective of communication management, International Communication Gazette, 77(1), 102-124, 2015

Cassegard, C, Contestation and bracketing: the relation between public space and the public sphere, Environment and Planning D-Society & Space, 32(4), 689-703, 2014

Clark, LS; Hoover, SM, Controversy and cultural symbolism: press relations and the formation of public discourse in the case of the re-imagining event, Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 14(4), 310-331, 1997

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De Beer, E, Creating value through communication, Public Relations Review, 40(2), 136-143, 2014

Fawkes, J; Moloney, K, (2008) Does the European Union (EU) need a propaganda watchdog like the us institute of propaganda analysis to strengthen its democratic civil society and free markets?, Public Relations Review, 34(3), 207-214

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active and vocal partner?, Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness, 9(4), 447-458, 2015

Griesse, MA, Developing social responsibility: biotechnology and the case of DuPont in brazil, Journal of Business Ethics, 73(1), 103-118, 2007

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Jackson, SJ; Welles, BF, Hijacking #mynypd: social media dissent and networked counterpublics, Journal of Communication, 65(6), 932-952, 2015

Larsson, AO; Ihlen, O, Birds of a feather flock together? Party leaders on twitter during the 2013 Norwegian elections, European Journal of Communication, 30(6), 666-681, 2015

L'etang, J, Public relations and sport in promotional culture, Public Relations Review, 32(4), 386-394, 2006

Littau, JJ, Time to "get" religion? an analysis of religious literacy among journalism students, Journal of Media and Religion, 14(3), 145-159, 2015

Magnan, A, Refeudalizing the public sphere: "manipulated publicity" in the Canadian debate on gm foods, Canadian Journal of Sociology-Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie, 31(1), 25-53, 2006

Maier, CT, Weathering the storm: Hauser's vernacular voices, public relations and the roman catholic church's sexual abuse scandal, Public Relations Review, 31(2), 219-227, 2005

Mazzarella, W, Worlding miss world, Bangalore, 1996, Identities-Global Studies in Culture and Power, 23(3), 294-306, 2016

Mcgaurr, L, Travel journalism and environmental conflict a cosmopolitan perspective, Journalism Studies, 11(1), 50-67, 2010

Nayden, N, A public world without public relations?, Javnost-The Public, 16(4), 23-39, 2009

Owens, L; Palmer, LK, Making the news: anarchist counter-public relations on the world wide web, Critical Studies in Media Communication, 20(4), 335-361, 2003

Rice, C; Somerville, I, Power-sharing and political public relations: government-press relationships in Northern Ireland's developing democratic institutions, Public Relations Review, 39(4), 293-302, 2013

Richards, B, Terrorism and public relations, Public Relations Review, 30(2), 169-176, 2004

Ringmar, E, Nationalism: the idiocy of intimacy, British Journal of Sociology, 49(4), 534-549, 1998

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Sommerfeldt, EJ, The civility of social capital: public relations in the public sphere, civil society, and democracy, Public Relations Review, 39(4), 280-289, 2013

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Whelan, G, Corporate constructed and dissent enabling public spheres: differentiating dissensual from consensual corporate social responsibility, Journal of Business Ethics, 115(4), 755-769, 2013

Wolf, K, Bridging the distance: the use of blogs as reflective learning tools for placement students, Higher Education Research & Development, 29(5), 589-602, 2010

Zaharna, RS, Beyond the individualism-collectivism divide to relationalism: explicating cultural assumptions in the concept of "relationships", Communication Theory, 26(2), 190-211, 2016

Zaharna, RS; Uysal, N, Going for the jugular in public diplomacy: how adversarial publics using social media are challenging state legitimacy, Public Relations Review, 42(1), 109-119, 2016

Zerfass, A; Vercic, D; Wiesenberg, M, The dawn of a new golden age for media relations? how PR professionals interact with the mass media and use new collaboration practices, Public Relations Review, 42(4), 499-508, 2016

Cluster 2

Archer, C; Harrigan, P, Show me the money: how bloggers as stakeholders are challenging theories of relationship building in public relations, Media International Australia, 160(1), 67-77, 2016

Burkart, R, On Jurgen Habermas and public relations, Public Relations Review, 33(3), 249-254, 2007

Collins, D, The quest to improve the human condition: the first 1500 articles published in Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Business Ethics, 26(1), 1-73, 2000

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