

**Impact of Public Relations Efforts in the Entertainment Industry on Organization-Public  
Relationship**

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**Author Note**

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this study represent the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of the U.S. government, Department of State, Department of Defense, Department of the Navy, or the Department of Homeland Security.

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**Abstract**

Knowing that people learn from entertainment media, organizations now employ entertainment media relations in many of the same ways they do traditional mainstream news media relations. This study examined the effect of entertainment public relations efforts on an organization's mediated portrayal in the television/movie industry. Focusing on two U.S.-based television programs predominantly featuring the U.S. Navy, this post-test only experimental design ( $N = 240$ ) examined whether technical support and access to the organization during the production of the television show impacted publics' relationship with or worldview toward the U.S. Navy. In predicting organization-public relationship, researchers found authenticity, credibility, and reputation to be key components leading to OPR.

*Keywords:* Public relations, relationship theory, organization public relationships, OPR, Hollywood, entertainment, entertainment PR

The public relations industry has long used the media to reach its target publics. Relying on traditional news media, practitioners have engaged third-party channels in order to tell their organizations' stories and teach people about their issues and organizations. With the rise of entertainment media, it would come as no surprise that practitioners added the entertainment genre to their toolkits. Entertainment media, by its mere design, allows an organization more latitude in telling that organization's story. In doing so, storytelling through entertainment media can be more dramatic and engaging than in traditional news coverage.

As such, entertainment is an increasingly important genre for communicators. To this point, Galloway (2005) asserted that media portrayal of an issue or place can have a powerful influence over public opinion (p. 233). Increasingly public relations practitioners have been working within the entertainment industry to further engage and educate their target publics about their organizations (Niedt, 2015).

This study empirically examines the effects of such use of entertainment media by public relations as a means to engage its target publics. Focusing tightly on the concept of mediated portrayals of an organization in entertainment products like Hollywood produced TV shows, this study builds on growing area of scholarship in entertainment that includes everything from sports to music to movies. As an examination of the organization-public relationship (OPR), this study specifically investigates the potential value added when an organization liaises with the entertainment industry to further support the organization's portrayal, and this study empirically examines the interplay between relationship and attitude toward the organization.

## **Literature Review**

### **Relationship Theory**

Noted to be among the most heuristic areas of public relations research (Ferguson, 1984, 2018; Sallot et al., 2003), the empirical study of relationship gets right at the heart of public relations itself. Indeed, examining the organization-public relationship allows researchers to better understand what tactics strengthen (Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014) and potentially degrade (Sweetser, 2010) relationship with key stakeholders. Relationship has been exhaustively examined, from government public affairs (Ni, 2006; Wise, 2007) to political campaigns (Seltzer & Zhang, 2011; Seltzer et al., 2013), and even to nonprofits (Waters & Bortree, 2012). This diversity of industry appears to be warranted, as Waters and Bortree (2012) found differences in the quality of relationships based on organizational type (nonprofit, retailer, political party).

To this end, OPR has served as both the independent variable and the dependent variable (Hung, 2005), and it has been both manipulated as well as simply observed. Even with such great academic attention on the construct, both scholars and practitioners appear persistently interested in explicating and applying this complex construct in terms of facilitating OPR in order to reach organizational goals. Though OPR is an intuitive concept, empirical data can shed light on the finer aspects of relationship that are impacted by specific tactics. Indeed, in some cases data reveal unexpected damage to OPR as a result of specific PR tactics (Sweetser, 2010). As such, continued research focusing on OPR in different contexts in relation to varied tactics continues to illuminate best practices for practitioners.

Since the focus on OPR began three decades ago, substantial empirical progress moved the scholarship forward. Broom et al. (1997) criticized OPR scholarship because of what they saw as a lack of a definition for OPR. In response, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) submitted a

definition from the interpersonal OPR perspective. This idea of comparing OPR to interpersonal relationship has some merit among scholars, especially as digital technologies evolved. Broom et al. (2000) then developed a revised definition, this one focusing on the exchange perspective and one that should be tracked over time. Hon and Grunig (1999) explicated the relational dimensions of trust, control mutuality, commitment, satisfaction, communal relationship, and exchange relationship as ways to measure the relationship perceptions between an organization and its publics. An undertone of Vos' (2009) research on municipalities indicated that communication with one's publics could result in a stronger relationship with those publics. Hung (2005) suggested that the type of relationship an organization wants to have with its publics would influence an organization's actual behavior.

Measuring OPR has not occurred without controversy as well. A good deal of OPR research fixates on the perspective of the organization's publics (Huang & Zhang, 2013), as opposed to how the organization might work to influence OPR. This one-sided view is not troublesome to Smith (2013), who agrees that organization-public relationships are not necessarily the result of a pro-active approach employed by an organization. The current study takes both perspectives into account (e.g., the organization's tactics to improve OPR and the perceived relationship from the public's perspective). Here, OPR is measured among an organization's publics, the public relations tactics employed by the organization are manipulated to see how such organizational acts might influence OPR.

When it comes to what might impact the relationship an organization has with a public, the perspective of the public takes priority. As such, OPR is more accurately considered the relationship as assessed by the stakeholder. Knowing this, researchers have attempted to understand what might improve or degrade the relationship. In this vein, most research focuses on proactive tactics organizations employ in order to serve their publics. For example, Browning et al. (2020) looked at the impact corporate advocacy has on OPR, finding advocacy to be an effective relational strategy. Brown and White (2010) discovered that a pre-existing positive relationship with an organization results in a lower likelihood for stakeholders to blame an organization when a crisis occurs. Looking at the inverse of building a relationship, Sweetser (2010) noted that companies who fail to use disclosure in PR campaigns may actually damage OPR.

### **Authenticity, Credibility, and Reputation as Antecedents to OPR**

Hung (2005) had earlier encouraged researchers to focus on antecedents of OPR, as opposed to merely relationship outcomes. This study seeks to understand the antecedents to OPR, and investigate how specific public relations tactics might influence OPR. Furthermore, connecting one's attitude, or worldview as it will be called here, toward an organization will help illuminate how variables such as credibility, authenticity, and reputation impact OPR.

An earlier study (Sweetser, 2015) refers to the collection of concepts such as authenticity, credibility, and reputation in relation to an organization as a favorable worldview. Kim et al. (2015) examined the impact of PR efforts on credibility, trust, and authenticity and found affective attributes could trigger cognitive processing. Given these findings, public relations practitioners can impact how publics see and think about their organizations through PR efforts.

Credibility in public relations is an often-researched topic. The research ranges from looking at source or medium credibility (Kioussis, 2006) to even examining how stakeholders assess different PR products (O'Neil et al., 2020). As newer tools are introduced to the practice, scholars examine how different publics view the credibility of these tools.

While there are inherent credibility questions in entertainment media due to dramatic components and the reality that Hollywood is primarily in the business of telling fictitious stories, there are components of credibility that the public can assess. For example, many television shows about espionage keep former or current intelligence representatives on set that can help provide credibility to the portrayal of the character or particular scenes (Shapira, 2015). While medium credibility, in this case a dramatic television show, may be viewed as not very credible, the source credibility may be increased through the efforts and consultation given by the actual intelligence representative. Furthermore, and central to this study, is that the intelligence agency's connection and support to the production in such a case is considered an entertainment PR effort. This study seeks to measure a similar type of source credibility as it relates increasing a favorable worldview of an organization.

Authenticity, another attribute of a favorable worldview, is defined as the qualities of a person or organization that is comprised of the truthfulness, transparency, consistency, and trustworthiness of their statements and actions (Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014). Gilpin et al. (2010) assert that authenticity is a product of how one's publics see the organization. Gilmore and Pine (2007) note that publics demand authenticity because of the prevalence of mediated and staged portrayals. As a result, Molleda (2010) argued that "the construct authenticity should become central to the study and practice of public relations" due to the publics' increased demand (p. 223). Just as the perceived qualifications of a political candidate help shape overall perceptions of political candidates (Kim & Kioussis, 2012), it can be presumed that a favorable view of authenticity for an organization can positively influence the overall view of that particular organization (Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014). In support of that assertion, Perez et al. (2020) found that message authenticity indeed led to trust and attitude toward an organization. As such, the more authentic an organization appears in the media, the higher the overall perception of that organization.

In the context of OPR, Molleda (2010) suggests that the public's perception of authenticity can determine the quality of the relationship between an organization and its publics. Additionally, the scholar notes that authenticity can be a moving target in that what publics see as authentic communication today evolves and may be interpreted differently in future communication interactions (Molleda, 2010). As such, Lee (2010) asserts that organizations have much at stake with regard to authenticity and are willing to invest in it in order to build longer-lasting relationships with their publics.

An organization's reputation is a critical component to sustaining a favorable worldview (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Reputation is defined as the qualities of a person or organization that is comprised of the leadership, vision, actions, and outputs demonstrated to the public (Kioussis & Kim, 2012). Fombrun and Shanley (1990) assert that reputation is determined by its publics based on available information about the organization. A direct correlation between reputation and overall salience of an object (such as an organization) has been shown to exist (Kim & Kioussis, 2012). Meijer and Kleinnijenhuis (2006) were able to illustrate that an increase in the salience of affective attributes (positive or negative issues) had a direct impact on the salience of the reputation of the organization. According to Coombs (2006), public perceptions of an organization's reputation, credibility, and legitimacy are directly related to how an organization would act during a crisis (Coombs, 2006). Fombrun (1996) asserted that corporate reputations, while pervasive, were not well-examined in scholarship. Though scholarship in this area has increased, less empirically studied are the reputations of government (Sweetser, 2015).

Other research found that while exposure to organizationally-sponsored entertainment PR content may not impact knowledge of the organization, it did impact the viewers' assessment of credibility, authenticity, and reputation (Sweetser, 2015). In all three cases (credibility, authenticity, and reputation), experimental participants were positively influenced by exposure to the entertainment PR content (Sweetser, 2015). Given these findings, the question remains as to what impact such a tactic might have on OPR.

### **Entertainment PR Collaboration**

Public relations practitioners collaborate with the entertainment industry to shape media content (Pardun & McKee, 1999; Niedt, 2015). This work is similar to media relations where a public relations practitioner works with a journalist to give the journalist access to the organization in hopes of also shaping the story and coverage (Hecht et al., 2017).

Even so, how is entertainment PR collaboration different from its marketing cousin of product placement? For marketing, product placement is exactly as it sounds: placing the product in the film or TV show. For public relations, this type of entertainment media collaboration is much more involved than product placement because the brand provides access to its organization and their processes. The brand is not merely shown in the entertainment media, but the brand actively helps shape the portrayal of its organization. This helps Hollywood storytellers inject a sense of realism into their shows (Srivastava, 2020). Practitioners ranked reasons to product placement in films, citing national viewing potential as the most important concern followed by the theme of movie (Pardun & McKee, 1999).

The most basic form of product placement merely involves a brand that purchases the opportunity to be included. For example, a beverage company may pay to have their product portrayed as the soda pop the main character drinks. Low-level product placement like that is often not enough to register with a consumer (van der Walldt et al., 2007). Though the extent of the media effects is debated in the literature, more involved entertainment PR collaboration is thought to positively impact publics who watch the movies or TV shows set within the featured brand's organization. Supporting this notion, using "product placement to create a good personality for a brand can increase brand equity" (Srivastava, 2020, p. 234). Building further on that argument, Srivastava (2020) contends that the integrated nature of product placement catches audiences without their typical guard against advertising up. Product placement allows viewers to connect the movie or TV show to their own worlds, which in turn may influence attitude, norms, and memory toward the brand (Srivastava, 2020, p. 235 – 236). For public relations, when the product placement occurs as entertainment media collaboration then it is much more central to a plot and prominent than the product placement of a can of soda pop (van Reijmersdal, 2009; Russell, 2002), the potential media effects would be expected to be even stronger.

One prevalent example in Hollywood occurs in crime dramas that rely heavily on forensic evidence. The emergent pervasiveness of this type of programming created a concept known as the CSI effect, which describes the potential influence of the volume and popularity of crime-oriented television programs on audiences (Smith et al., 2011). As discussed by Sarapin and Sparks (2009), one side of this phenomenon is an increased interest in forensic-science education and careers. By the same token, it resulted in a public attuned to forensics and increased knowledge of crime science in the general juror pool (Sarapin & Sparks, 2009).

This example shows how influential narratives presented via Hollywood portrayals can work in informing interest, knowledge, and worldviews of an audience. It is also an example of

how organizations and industries can be affected by the stories told on television. Colleges and organizations in need of people with an interest in forensic science benefit from the positive audience response to the narratives. Attorneys and the legal system at large, however, find this new burden of required forensic evidence may skew juror opinions in an excessive manner and can create an impediment to justice.

The types of industries and organizations providing technical support via entertainment PR collaborations may be surprising to some. U.S. government institutions have a well-documented relationship with Hollywood (Girona & Xifra, 2010), going all the way back to the establishment of a “Hollywood office” for the military in WWII up through more recent examples being the U.S. space agency NASA providing technical support and liaising for the 2015 movie *The Martian* (Niedt, 2015). According to Niedt (2015), a NASA executive explained the reason for public relations support as not being so much overt promotion, but rather providing access to an agency otherwise not accessible to the general public. Niedt (2015), however, noted how NASA used the release of the movie as a means to further promote its issues and other news from the space agency through an integrated social media campaign drawing comparisons between plot lines in the movie and space discoveries by NASA.

Niedt (2015) reported that NASA has been working with Hollywood since 1997, but other U.S. government agencies have even longer-standing relationships. One of the most cited examples involves the Department of Defense and U.S. Navy’s entertainment PR efforts on the film *Top Gun*, a film released in 1986. For this film, several scenes were filmed at the real-world training center, Navy Fighter Weapon School then located in Miramar, California. This on-location filming added an authenticity rarely seen in modern peacetime military-focused movies. The film studio considered the \$1.8 million cost for the use of the planes and aircraft carriers featured to be a budget-saver (Sirota, 2011). As Youn (2013, p. 17) reported in a piece on the military industrial complex for *Fortune*, “Even in an age of special effects, it’s exponentially cheaper to film on actual military ships with real military advisors.” The upcoming summer 2021 release of the sequel, *Top Gun: Maverick*, also engaged in entertainment PR collaboration:

“According to a production assistance agreement, Paramount Pictures Corp. was given a tremendous amount of access to Naval facilities and personnel in California, Nevada and Washington state — including permission to fly aircraft, place cameras on and in F/A-18 Super Hornets and Navy helicopters, as well as escorted access to a Nimitz-class nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. The Navy was also expected to train cast members in water survival and aircraft seat ejection.” (Hansen, 2019, para. 3).

In exchange, the military was permitted “to review with public affairs the script’s thematics and weave in key talking points relevant to the aviation community” (Hansen, 2019, para. 5).

Producers of films like the Oscar-nominated film, *Captain Phillips*, and the nonfiction-book-turned-movie, *Lone Survivor*, worked closely with military advisors, making script changes as required in order to gain the approval and support of the DOD. *Captain Phillips* was allotted a guided-missile destroyer, an amphibious assault ship, several helicopters, and actual members of SEAL Team Six for use in filming. *Lone Survivor* incurred no location fees and was given access to the training grounds for the Air Force Special Forces unit that actually completed the rescue mission for the central character (Weisman, 2014).

However, access is not granted to all filmmakers with military subject-matter. Films like *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Hurt Locker*, and *Argo* did not receive support from the DOD and were therefore not required to make script changes and accept entertainment PR efforts in shaping the

narrative. If the production does not need technical support, then there is little reason to provide DOD the opportunity to influence the portrayal and attributes within these films.

Some may view the government's involvement with entertainment media generally as "paid patriotism," as a Senate investigation found (U.S. Senate, 2015). The difference in these examples again lies in the difference between marketing and public relations. That is, military sponsorship in the NFL or NASCAR is not conducted as a public relations (or public affairs as it is called in the military) function. Instead, these sponsorships are marketing endeavors for recruiting purposes. In reality, the National Defense Authorization Act limits the use of advertising funds to recruiting purposes only (S. 1790; NDAA 2020, Pub. L. 116-92). The NASCAR sponsorship and similar projects were recruiting efforts. Given these limitations, public affairs personnel must be creative with how they can expose the public to their military organizations without the use of paid advertisements. Providing technical assistance and access as a part of a greater entertainment PR collaboration enables military public affairs the opportunity to shape the narrative Hollywood is advancing about their organization without having to pay for representation as product placement. This is similar to the media relations work practitioners undertake when employing framing (Becktel et al., 2021).

Both the real-world presence of entertainment PR efforts in providing technical assistance from the military and the reality that not all military-themed Hollywood productions receive such support create a ripe opportunity for examining the effects of entertainment PR efforts.

Earlier research found (Sweetser, 2015) that such technical support provided through an organization's entertainment PR efforts indeed results in a more favorable worldview (higher credibility, authenticity, and reputation ratings). Knowing that these worldview concepts can be related to OPR, the next step appears to be to test how favorable assessment of concepts such as credibility, authenticity, and reputation may impact OPR. As such, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What difference, if any, exists in OPR when the portrayal of the organization was supported through technical support as an entertainment PR effort?

RQ2: How does OPR correlate, if at all, with favorable worldview concepts such as credibility, authenticity, and reputation?

RQ3: How do, if at all, favorable worldview concepts such as credibility, authenticity, and reputation predict OPR?

## **Method**

This study employed a posttest-only, controlled experiment with two treatment conditions and one control group to test whether entertainment PR collaboration impacts OPR. This study adopts the Hung (2005) approach to focus on the antecedents to OPR; here, OPR serves as the dependent variable and entertainment PR efforts serve as the independent variable. The experimental cells were as follows:

- ***PR supported content:*** a real, current Hollywood-produced television show depicting an organization where that organization provides technical support and access via entertainment PR efforts in the show's production ( $n = 80$ )

- ***Non-supported content:*** a real, current Hollywood-produced television show depicting an organization, however that organization did not provide technical support or access via entertainment PR efforts ( $n = 84$ ), and
- ***Control group:*** a control stimulus ( $n = 76$ ) that was not about the organization at all.

### **Procedure**

The entire experiment was facilitated online through Qualtrics. Participants with access to a computer and the internet were invited to participate in the study anywhere they had access to a computer and the internet. This created an opportunity for high external validity, given that Nielsen ratings note more people are streaming online video than watching these programs on their television sets (Luckerson, 2014) and a majority of young people prefer streaming video (Castillo, 2015).

Upon entering the online study, participants were randomly assigned an experimental cell. The stimulus presented was an online streaming video (clip). All of the clips used were approximately seven minutes long and participants were held on the screen for the duration of the video before they were able to continue in the study to the posttest. This clip length is consistent with previous OPR studies (Sweetser, 2010). Each participant advanced to the exact same questionnaire after seeing the experimental stimulus.

The researchers chose the U.S. Navy as the organization portrayed in the stimuli because of the number of existing Hollywood portrayals of the U.S. Navy. To this point, the U.S. Navy maintains a Hollywood office whose sole purpose is provide technical support and access to such productions, which speaks to the regularity of the U.S. Navy providing this type of PR support to productions. At the time that the experiment was conducted, there were a number of productions that featured the U.S. Navy, with some officially supported by a production agreement and some being produced independently without any type of U.S. Navy support. Uniquely during this period, there were two similar 1-hour format TV shows about ships at sea on the air. One of these programs was supported by the U.S. Navy and the other was independently produced without support from the U.S. Navy. The use of real-world shows furthers the ecological validity of the study. Furthermore, the experimental design used here offers practitioners an empirical understanding of the impact of PR support in a Hollywood portrayal.

The U.S. Navy-supported ( $n = 80$ ) TV show which used PR and technical support was *The Last Ship* (Steinberg & Kane, 2014). The non-supported show ( $n = 84$ ) was produced independently of any U.S. Navy PR or technical support and was called *The Last Resort* (Gajdusek & Ryan, 2012). Those in the control group ( $n = 76$ ) watched a segment of the documentary *Shark: Mind of the Demon with Fabien Cousteau* (Cousteau, 2006), which had no U.S. Navy content. Both *The Last Ship* and *The Last Resort* were television shows which were airing at the time the study was conducted, and as such *The Last Ship* and *The Last Resort* were selected due to their contemporary and paralleling natures. The experimental stimuli (e.g., clips) from *The Last Ship* and *The Last Resort* were selected because they most closely resembled each other in content and plot. Both clips prominently featured the U.S. Navy, a vessel under attack, and the commanding officer talking to the crew. The clips selected for the stimuli were done so to ensure content consistency (a simulated battle for a U.S. Navy ship), and care was taken to ensure that the high external validity of using real television shows did not introduce extraneous variables into the stimuli. To mirror how a viewer would experience the shows in the real world and aid in ecological validity, participants were not told in advance whether a show had technical support from the U.S. Navy. This is in keeping with the practice that such a disclosure is not

explicitly stated before these programs normally air. Typically, disclosure for technical assistance comes in fine print within the show credits at the end of the program. Though the McCain-Flake Report (U.S. Senate, 2015) investigated different types of entertainment engagement, they too found that many paid patriotism activities at NFL games did not provide sponsorship disclosure. As such, practitioners are afforded a more realistic understanding of the possible value of entertainment PR collaborations through the data here, without introducing a false reality of forced disclosure before viewing a show.

A manipulation check was run to determine whether the manipulation worked. The manipulation check revealed that participants properly identified whether the U.S. Navy would have likely supported the television program,  $\chi^2(4) = 165.99, p \leq .001$ , as expected.

### **Participants**

The data were collected from general education communication courses at a large university in the western United States. Considering this study was meant to focus on how the entertainment PR efforts might impact OPR, the questionnaire did inquire as to whether there was an existing relationship with the U.S. Navy. Only a small group of participants said that they were employed by the U.S. Navy (4.2%;  $n = 10$ ).

The participants, for the most part, self-reported having not seen the television shows before (91.7%;  $n = 220$ ). Some couldn't remember whether they had seen the stimulus clip prior to the experiment (4.2%;  $n = 10$ ). A majority of the participants reported that they did enjoy watching the stimulus video (61.7%;  $n = 148$ ). The participants reported having watched an average of 1.74 hours of television the previous day ( $SD = 1.76$ ).

Given their age ( $M = 21.91$  years old,  $SD = 4.19$ ) and media consumption habits, the participants were in the prime demographic for both recruiting age for the U.S. Navy and target audience for the television show. The majority of the participants were female (75%;  $n = 180$ ), with nearly a quarter reporting themselves as male (22%;  $n = 55$ ). The racial ethnicity of the participants was Caucasian (59.2%;  $n = 142$ ), Hispanic/Latinx (16.3%;  $n = 39$ ), Asian American (8.3%;  $n = 20$ ) tied with those who self-reported as "other" (8.3%;  $n = 20$ ), Black (2.5%;  $n = 6$ ), and Pacific Islander (1.7%;  $n = 4$ ). Not all participants provided demographic information about themselves.

### **Measures and Data Analysis**

The participants rated their perceived relationship with the U.S. Navy, as the supporting organization, using Sweetser and Kelleher's (2016) abbreviated 11-item OPR scale. This scale is known to be a reliable battery based on a well-established OPR maintenance scale (Browning et al., 2020). The scale was factor analyzed using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation, resulting in two factors explaining 57.3% of the variance. The factors were consistent with the previous testing of the OPR scale. Factor 1 is best described as *Communicated Relational Commitment* (Cronbach's alpha = .86), and included concepts such as "implies relationship has future/long term commitment." Factor 2 was labeled *Responsiveness and Conversational Voice* (Cronbach's alpha = .78), and included concepts such as "speaks with a human voice." The standardized factor scores were used in the analysis. See Table 1 for factor composition.

Authenticity of the U.S. Navy was measured on an 11-item, 5-point Likert-type scale (Louden & McCauliff, 2004; Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014) with high reliability ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Items in this scale included, for example, agreement that the organization is "transparent in revealing its operations," "going to do what it says it will do," and "consistent between presented positions on

issues and actual actions taken.” These 11 items were summed into a single index for analysis, as previously done with these measures.

A 20-item, 5-point Likert-type scale was used to measure the level of reputation participants subsequently assigned the U.S. Navy after watching the stimulus (Kim & Kiouisis, 2012). The scale was high in reliability ( $\alpha = .93$ ). The reputation scale included items such as the organization “has excellent leadership,” “has good personnel,” “inspires admiration and respect,” and that it “inspires trust.” These 20 items were unidimensional in explaining the concept of reputation of the U.S. Navy, and summed into a single index for analysis. See Table 2 for item mean scores.

Five items from Kiouisis (2006) measured participants’ credibility of the U.S. Navy after watching the show stimulus ( $\alpha = .70$ ). Participants indicated the degree to which the show watched appeared to have an “accurate portrayal” and “fair portrayal” of the U.S. Navy in the stimulus video shown. The items were summed in a single index score that was used in the analysis, in keeping with previous uses of this scale. See Table 2 for item mean scores.

## **Results**

This posttest-only experimental design ( $N = 240$ ) with control ( $n = 76$ ) exposed some participants to either a U.S. Navy-supported television program about the service ( $n = 80$ ) or an independently-produced (not supported) television program also about the service ( $n = 84$ ). The experiment sought to understand the impact of public relations engagement with the entertainment industry in terms of perceived relationship between the organization and its publics, as well as perceptions of the organization’s reputation, authenticity, and credibility.

### **Relationship based on Exposure to Entertainment PR Content**

This study investigated possible differences in relationship based on entertainment PR efforts of technical support. To do so, a one-way analysis of variance was run investigating the differences in each factor based on experimental cell (e.g., program supported by the U.S. Navy, program not supported by the U.S. Navy, and control).

In both cases for the *Communicated Relational Commitment* and the *Responsiveness and Conversational Voice* factors there were no main effects across the comparisons of three cells, though the statistical significance for Factor 1 was just outside of acceptable thresholds. Given that there were no significant main effects, a follow-up post-hoc test was not conducted.

Most experiments which employ ANOVA to test the impact of the independent variable manipulation on the dependent variables rely on the control group to provide a baseline. But, is there a difference between the supported and independent productions? Following the Saville model (1990), which suggests that researchers who conduct both ANOVA and t tests report all results, the researchers continued with follow-on t test results which illuminated the differences between the two experimental cells, excluding the control.

An independent samples t test investigated if there was a difference in OPR between the PR supported and non-supported experimental cells. For the first factor, *Communicated Relational Commitment*, the participants who were exposed to the entertainment PR supported production had a stronger standardized OPR factor score ( $M = .09$ ) than those who were exposed to the independent production that was not supported by the organization ( $M = -.20$ ).

As such, the answer to RQ1 is that there are early indications that *Communicated Relational Commitment* can be affected by exposure to entertainment PR efforts, and that those

who are exposed to content about the same organization (though not created as PR) fail to realize that relationship OPR factor score gain.

### **Correlating Concepts**

A series of Pearson R correlation tests were run to determine if the concepts examined here – relationship as measured by OPR, reputation, authenticity, and credibility – were related.

The first OPR factor *Communicated Relational Commitment* significantly correlated with authenticity ( $r = .322, p \leq .001$ ) and reputation ( $r = .350, p \leq .001$ ). The second OPR factor *Responsiveness and Conversational Voice* correlated with all of the favorable worldview concepts: authenticity ( $r = .454, p \leq .001$ ), credibility ( $r = .344, p \leq .001$ ), and reputation ( $r = .430, p \leq .001$ ).

Looking at how the favorability items are correlated amongst themselves, authenticity is moderately correlated with reputation ( $r = .650, p \leq .001$ ) and weakly correlated with credibility ( $r = .378, p \leq .001$ ). Credibility is weakly correlated with reputation ( $r = .338, p \leq .001$ ).

### **Predicting Relationship**

In order to understand how authenticity, reputation, and credibility might predict OPR, two separate linear regression models were created separately predicting each OPR factor. See Table 3 for regression results.

A resulting regression model explained 12.2% of the concept *Communicated Relational Commitment* (adjusted  $R^2 = .122, p \leq .001$ ). The only significant coefficient in the model to predict this OPR factor was reputation. As such, the publics' assessment of an organization's reputation appears to predict *Communicated Relational Commitment*.

The regression equation predicting *Responsiveness and Conversational Voice* explained 25.8% of this OPR factor (adjusted  $R^2 = .258$ ). For this OPR factor, authenticity and credibility predicted responsiveness and voice.

In answering this research question, the role of these favorability items such as credibility, reputation, and authenticity are apparent. It appears these variables play a greater role in revealing the concepts that comprise one's perspective on *Responsiveness and Conversational Voice*.

## **Discussion**

This study sought to understand the impact of entertainment PR efforts, and how such strategically-integrated tactics might influence OPR. Early indications here are that practitioners can positively influence OPR through such efforts, but researchers and practitioners should be cautioned on applying too much heft to these findings.

The experimental group who watched the independently-produced clip that did not receive entertainment PR efforts had a noticeably poor OPR factor score for the *Communicated Relational Commitment* factor. As a standardized score, a  $-.20$  represents that this group was below the average OPR for this factor. Comparing this to the group who saw a clip that did have entertainment PR efforts as technical support, the overall mean was both positive (therefore above the mean for OPR overall) and a  $.29$  difference from the other experimental group.

This suggests to practitioners whose organizations are portrayed in Hollywood that providing technical assistance to help shape the quality and accuracy of that portrayal can positively impact OPR. As Hutton and Mak (2014) pointed out, many times Hollywood portrayals of an industry or profession “tend to be caricatures, at best, and serious distortions and

clichés, at worst, whose value as a legitimate education tool may be limited, and perhaps more negative than positive” (p. 585). This media effects oriented study, therefore, sheds light on the real impact of mediated portrayals on viewers’ perceptions. Without the organization involved in a production to provide technical assistance, the portrayal of the organization and its people can skew in a direction which might be more entertaining than accurate. As such, the practitioners engaging in this type of entertainment PR collaboration get value from shaping the portrayals of their organizations and, in some cases, may even prevent negative portrayals or possible crises.

Few studies to date have examined which tactics or actions an organization might do to impact OPR. Considering the Broom et al. (2000) approach to OPR, where relationship is tracked over time and is understandably different day-to-day, academic inquiry in to the specific acts that can impact that trend line are important. Certainly Sweetser (2010) found that lack of disclosure would hurt OPR and Browning et al. (2020) discovered advocacy can strengthen OPR, but overall this very practical approach to understanding how to improve OPR with specific public relations efforts is a much-needed area of growth for public relations research.

Concepts such as credibility, authenticity, and reputation had previously been introduced into OPR studies to better understand how these constructs are related. The data here further proved that relationship in the correlations noted between these world view constructs with one another. Looking at the relationship between OPR and the worldview constructs the results show that when it comes to the *Responsiveness and Conversational Voice* factor, authenticity and credibility play important roles. In this context of entertainment PR efforts, the organization being real and portrayed in such a manner is key. The regression findings in this study provide further support for the argument that understanding OPR is a complex web of constructs – some psychological and some practitioner-shaped through PR efforts.

While this data was collected focusing on a U.S.-based audience and their reaction to government public relations entertainment support, it can be generalized out to a larger and more corporate application. Indeed, work from non-profits has been applied to corporate settings and some of the earliest OPR research focused on government public affairs with those findings extrapolated to more corporate situations. From portrayals of healthcare in general to shows whose plot revolves around a particular company, there are many industries within PR that can find value through the data here. Taking this with the findings from Waters and Bortree (2012), which found that political-type relationships (a subset of government) result in the weakest relationship levels, implies that the findings here would be amplified if considered in a corporate context. Regardless, the future research should continue on in this vein and test the impact of entertainment public relations support in contexts such as non-profit and consumer sectors.

### **Practical Applications**

Often, entertainment media collaborations such as those examined here are not promoted by the organization that opened its doors to a Hollywood production. In the case of many U.S. Navy portrayals where they provided technical assistance and access, the main “promotion” of the Navy’s involvement is in the form of a special or advance screening of the production for U.S. Navy personnel. In many of the projects, the U.S. Navy does not share their PR involvement with a larger, external audience. As such, the organization provides the technical support and the key external PR outcome benefit comes from having shaped the narrative to a truer-to-life portrayal of that organization. The reason for practitioners’ reluctance to tout these collaborations was not examined here, as this study dealt with the media effects of such a public relations strategy.

Now knowing the impact on OPR, credibility, authenticity, reputation, and world view provided by this study, practitioners can start to ask themselves whether they should better promote their Hollywood engagement. Research from van Reijmersdal et al. (2013) suggests that when viewers are told about the product placement relationship (e.g., disclosure), memory of the brand increases. They also found that skepticism did not change as a result of an informed viewer. Taken together, this suggests practitioners would benefit from promoting their involvement more with Hollywood productions. The findings of this study then suggest that the NASA approach to creating an entire public relations campaign coinciding with the release of *The Martian* would not make audiences more skeptical or less trusting of NASA. Instead, it would afford the organization an opportunity to capitalize on the journalistic news values of timeliness, relevance, and novelty (Niedt, 2015). Moving forward, entertainment PR collaboration should perhaps be less of a tactical act, and a part of a greater integrated strategy that provides benefits after the production is released as well.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. While the stimuli had high external validity in that they were real Hollywood-produced television shows, using two different programs meant that there was some variation in the scenes shown as stimuli in terms of characters, script, scenario, etc. Furthermore, a single seven-minute clip was shown as opposed to an entire episode, which degrades some of the streaming external validity one would experience. This, however, was a limitation that the researchers were willing to accept due to the intangibles of content shaping that occurred as a result of the real-world manipulation of the independent variable.

The use of college students in the sample remains a limitation that plagues much experimental research. Certainly, the researchers took care to validate the secondary data reporting this age group uses streaming video as opposed to watching television shows in a more traditional manner, but the convenience sample remains a limitation. Further, whether this group would have been naturally interested enough in the programs to watch them in the first place is an artifact of experimental design.

### **Future Research**

This study served as a step forward in connecting OPR research with the public relations practice, and discovering the impact specific tactics have on OPR. More research should continue this line of efforts to not only create more parsimony between the ivory tower and the practitioners who are working on relationships with their stakeholders on a day-to-day basis. Scholars should continue to look to the practice for inspiration in their innovative ways that they attempt to engage publics, and test the true impact of those tactics.

Research examining military public affairs as facet of public relations remains limited. Just as scholars have investigated other contexts where practitioners support organizations, more attention should be paid to the highly regulated segment of practitioners who serve in public affairs roles for government or the military.

Scholars should continue to examine concepts that similarly occur in public relations and marketing, such as the idea of product placement verses the entertainment PR collaboration efforts described here. To this point, scholars should build on the strength of marketing research which often provides a psychology-based assessment and expand that work by looking at the impact these tools have on the perceptions of the organizations. Zerfass et al. (2016, p. 502) argue that old forms of public relations are becoming outdated and challenged by a broadened concept of strategic mediaization, which they say “blurs what used to be constitutive borders

between advertising (paid publicity) and media relations (earned publicity), mass media” and others.

### **Conclusion**

This study was an important empirical step in the ever-growing understanding of OPR in public relations practice. Extending our understating of the specific tactics and overall strategy that a public relations practitioner can enact in order to strengthen OPR not only advances theory, but connects that theory to the practice.

The power of film has been used by the military for generations (Girona & Xifra, 2013; Xifra & Girona, 2012), through newsreels sharing updates from foreign shores, as means to stir patriotism through WWII, and now as a way to let those without ties to the services better understand the military. Though today’s Hollywood engagement for the military appears to be driven by helping correct a potentially inaccurate portrayal, practitioners should begin to embrace the other benefits like changes in the viewer’s worldview. The stories and the characters in these productions, though not perfect Pollyanna models from the PR standpoint, may allow the public an opportunity to further humanize the organization and build a stronger relationship. By embracing a wider mix of tools and approaches like Zerfass et al. (2016) suggest, practitioners can blend traditional and nontraditional media to contribute to a new style, evolved and integrated style of public relations.

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Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of 11-Item OPR Scale

Item	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	Factor 1	Factor 2
<b>Factor 1: <i>Communicated Relational Commitment</i></b>				
Demonstrates a commitment to maintaining a relationship	3.41	.86	.82	
Implies relationship has future/long term commitment	3.28	.91	.80	
Communicates desire to build relationship	3.14	.93	.69	
Uses a positive/optimistic tone	3.56	.85	.68	
Expresses cheer & optimism about the future	3.47	.88	.58	
<b>Factor 2: <i>Responsiveness and Conversational Voice</i></b>				
Makes communication enjoyable	3.03	.68		.69
Positively address complaints or queries	3.16	.75		.66
Would admit mistakes	3.00	1.00		.64
Provides prompt/uncritical feedback when addressing criticism	3.14	.80		.58
Provides connections to competitors	3.83	.86		.53
Uses a sense of humor in communication	3.73	.77		.48
Variance explained			41.3%	15.9%

Note: The items were asked on a 5-point Likert scale where a 1=strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. The alpha for Factor 1 was .86 and the alpha for Factor 2 is .78.

Table 2 – *Credibility, Authenticity, and Reputation Mean Scores*

	<i><b>M</b></i>	<i><b>SD</b></i>
Credibility index items ( $\alpha=.70$ )		
Accurately	3.11	.84
Believably	3.37	1.02
Fairly	3.44	.82
Objectively	3.18	.93
Authenticity index items ( $\alpha=.89$ )		
Comfortable with the way it operates.	3.74	.77
Consistent between presented positions on issues and actual actions taken.	3.50	.84
Representing its true methods of operation.	3.58	.89
Transparent in revealing its operations.	2.85	1.01
Honest about missions and goals.	3.19	1.02
Going to do what it says it will do.	3.45	.92
Sending out authentic messages.	3.39	.87
Perceived by the public as authentic.	3.71	.92
Perceived by the public as secretive.	2.59	1.02
Trustworthy.	3.70	.85
Too political.	3.02	.91
Reputation index items ( $\alpha= .93$ )		
Takes advantage of opportunities.	3.82	.73
Has excellent leadership.	4.05	.73
Has a clear vision for the future.	3.77	.84
Supports good causes.	3.84	.82
Is environmentally responsible.	3.18	.95
Is responsible in the community.	3.73	.78
Is an organization I feel good about.	3.83	.87
Inspires admiration and respect.	4.07	.71
Inspires trust.	3.81	.86
Provides high-quality services.	3.95	.76
Provides innovative services.	3.74	.74
Provides good value for the tax payer money spent.	3.47	.92
Stands behind its services.	3.91	.72
Rewards employees fairly.	3.41	.84
Is a good place to work.	3.36	.82
Has good personnel.	3.82	.71
Outperforms competitors.	3.60	.78
Has a record of being profitable.	3.27	.74
Is a good investment.	3.52	.88
Has growth prospects.	3.79	.80

*Note.* Items were measured on 5-point Likert *Strongly Disagree* (1) to *Strongly Agree* (5) scale.

Table 3. Linear Regression Predicting Relationship

	Standardized Coefficient $\beta$	
	Factor 1 (adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.122)	Factor 2 (adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.258)
Relationship Coefficients		
<i>Reputation</i>	.36***	
<i>Authenticity</i>		.426***
<i>Credibility</i>		.174*

\* $p \leq .05$ , \*\* $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq .001$