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Public Relations and Relationship Management: A Systematic Literature Review of Organisation-Public Relationships, 2000–2025

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Abstract
Public relations literature has shifted from evaluating communication outputs to analysing relationships between organisations and their publics. This review synthesises peer-reviewed research from 2000 to 2025 on organisation-public relationships (OPRs). The review explored how relationships are theorised, measured, and applied. It identifies key factors that improve relationship quality, outcomes of strong relationships, and areas with limited evidence. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, searches were conducted from January 3rd to July 18th, 2026, across SciSpace, Google Scholar, and publisher platforms, with citation tracking. The period covered was 2000-2025. From an initial 106 records, 69 unique studies were screened, 38 assessed, and 30 included after verification. The review shows that relationship management has matured, supported by validated scales, cross-cultural and digital studies, public sector applications, and meta-analyses. Trust, satisfaction, commitment, and mutual control are core indicators, while openness, engagement, transparency, authenticity, dialogue, access, and communication are predictors of relationship quality. Reputations, advocacy, loyalty, supportive intentions, legitimacy, and information seeking are key outcomes. Evidence is mainly corporate, cross-sectional, and from North America, Europe, and parts of Asia; less is available for public institutions, development organisations, humanitarian work, and Africa. The review proposes an integrated relational pathway relating context, communication, relationships, quality, and outcomes, and sets a research agenda for broader, longitudinal, and comparative studies.

Keywords: public relations; relationship management; organisation-public relationships; trust; dialogue.

1. Introduction

Public relations has traditionally been associated with image-making, publicity, media relations, persuasion, and organisational reputation. These activities remain integral to professional practice; however, they do not fully explain the significance of communication to organisations

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or the publics affected by organisational decisions. From the late twentieth century onward, scholarship in public relations has increasingly shifted its analytical focus from the volume and visibility of messages to the quality of relationships fostered through organisational communication. This paradigm shift has endowed the field with a more strategic and evaluative orientation. Rather than merely asking whether information reaches an audience, relationship-centred research examines whether communication enhances trust, satisfaction, commitment, participation, mutual influence, and supportive behaviour. Consequently, the relational turn redefines the effectiveness of public relations as a continuous organisational condition, rather than a short-term communicative outcome.

The conceptual roots of this movement pre-date the review period. Broom, Casey and Ritchey (1997) argued that public relations required a more precise theory of organisation-public relationships, while Ledingham and Bruning (1998) demonstrated that relationship dimensions could distinguish different stakeholder responses. Hon and Grunig (1999) subsequently offered widely used indicators for evaluating relationships. These works fall outside the 2000 – 2025 eligibility window and were not counted among the included studies, but they provide the intellectual background against which the post-2000 literature developed. The first years of the review period were characterised by attempts to clarify what relationships mean, create reliable measures and show how relational quality connects to organisational effectiveness.

Ledingham (2003) gave this development its clearest theoretical formulation by arguing that relationship management could function as a general theory of public relations. The importance of that proposition lies in its ability to connect everyday communication activities to organisational and stakeholder outcomes. Relationship management does not reduce public relations to interpersonal friendliness. It treats organisations and publics as interdependent actors whose patterns of communication, exchange, and mutual expectation shape both parties' capacity to pursue goals. Strong relationships can reduce conflict, improve information flow, increase support, and provide organisations with early knowledge of stakeholder concerns. Poor relationships can undermine trust even when message production is technically proficient.

Measurement research strengthened this theoretical notion. Huang (2001) developed the Organisation-Public Relationship Assessment scale using cross-cultural data, and later validation studies showed that trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality could be applied across organisational settings (Jo, Hon, & Brunner, 2005; Jo, 2006). Other scholars expanded the relational construct by examining commitment, relationship types and cultivation strategies (Bruning & Galloway, 2003; Hung, 2005; Ki & Hon, 2009). As the literature developed, the central question therefore changed from whether relationships should matter to how they are formed, how they should be measured and what outcomes they generate.

The rise of digital communication further widened the field. Social networking sites created direct, visible and measurable forms of interaction between organisations and publics. Research showed, however, that technological interactivity does not automatically produce dialogue. Organisations frequently use digital channels to distribute information while underusing responsiveness, access, conversation and stakeholder participation. Studies of corporate social networking sites nevertheless show that engagement, transparency and authenticity can strengthen relational outcomes and advocacy when organisations use digital communication

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interactively (Men & Tsai, 2013, 2014). Wirtz and Zimbres (2018) reached a similar conclusion in their systematic analysis of dialogic communication research: the field had accumulated a substantial body of studies, but many studies measured technological features instead of dialogue as an actual relational process.

Recent synthesis research provides a strong basis for reassessing the field. Cheng (2018) reviewed 156 studies published between 1998 and 2016 and identified important weaknesses, including heavy reliance on cross-sectional self-report data, dyadic assumptions and limited attention to multi-party relationships. Ki, Ertem-Eray and Hayden (2023) later mapped 219 relationship-management articles and 22,926 citations, finding rapid growth after 2010 and a sustained focus on frameworks, relationship-quality measures and theory testing. Most importantly, Ma, Ma and Liu (2023) meta-analysed 454 correlations from 67 empirical studies involving 30,223 participants and found strong associations between OPRs and recurring antecedents such as engagement, authenticity, transparency, interactivity and two-way communication, as well as consequences such as reputation, advocacy and positive word-of-mouth. Zhan and Zhao (2023) similarly reported substantial positive associations between organisational openness, public engagement and OPR quality.

Despite this maturation, several problems justify a new systematic review. First, relationship-management research has expanded into internal communication, public diplomacy, corporate diplomacy, government communication, nonprofit communication, crisis communication and social media, but these streams are often discussed separately. Second, the dominance of corporate and Western research raises questions about the explanatory reach of current models in public institutions, development organisations and non-Western settings. Third, newer scholarship increasingly challenges simple dyadic models by showing that relationships are affected by culture, identity, intergroup dynamics, crisis conditions and institutional constraints. Fourth, the field needs a synthesis that connects theoretical foundations, measurable antecedents, communication practices and outcomes instead of treating them as isolated findings.

This review addresses these issues through a PRISMA 2020-guided systematic literature review of peer-reviewed journal scholarship published from 2000 to 2025. It does not claim that all relationship scholarship can be reduced to a single causal model. It instead examines the degree to which the accumulated evidence supports a relational understanding of public relations, identifies where the evidence is strongest, and specifies where existing assumptions require further testing. The review also places particular attention on public-sector, development and non-Western applications because these areas are important for testing whether theories developed largely in corporate settings travel effectively across institutional and cultural contexts.

2. Review Objectives and Research Questions

The review has four objectives: to trace the theoretical development of public relations as relationship management during 2000 – 2025; to identify the principal antecedents and indicators of organisation-public relationship quality; to synthesise evidence concerning relational outcomes and communication practices across organisational settings; and to identify methodological, institutional and geographical gaps that should guide future research.

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RQ1. How did relationship management and OPR scholarship develop theoretically and methodologically between 2000 and 2025?

RQ2. Which communication practices and relational antecedents are most consistently associated with relationship quality?

RQ3. Which organisational, attitudinal and behavioural outcomes are associated with strong OPRs?

RQ4. How do organisational type, cultural context, digital communication and crisis conditions shape relationship-management processes?

RQ5. Which gaps limit the present evidence base, and what research agenda follows from those gaps?

3. Method

3.1 Review design and reporting framework

The review adhered to PRISMA 2020 principles (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA 2020 offers a 27-item reporting framework and revised flow diagrams for transparency in study identification, selection, appraisal, and synthesis. Since this review focuses on heterogeneous social-science studies rather than a single clinical intervention, PRISMA served as a reporting and screening guide, with synthesis remaining qualitative and theory-oriented. The review was not prospectively registered; this is explicitly stated since retrospective registration would not enhance transparency. The search was conducted from January 3 to July 18, 2026, covering publications from January 1, 2000, to December 31, 2025.

3.2 Information sources and source credibility

The search employed three discovery methods: first, SciSpace's peer-reviewed scholarly index was searched with six structured topic queries covering relationship management, OPR measurement, cultivation strategies, dialogue, digital engagement, internal relationships, and public/nonprofit/international contexts. Second, Google Scholar was used as a supplementary source for discovery and citation tracing. Third, official publisher platforms and journal websites were checked to verify bibliographic details, journal provenance, and DOI information. The final corpus mainly included publications from Taylor & Francis, Elsevier, Emerald, and SAGE. Manuscripts, dissertations, theses, conference papers, book chapters, and unverified uploads were excluded, even if found in discovery searches, so inclusion depended on verifying peer-reviewed journal publication through a credible publisher or journal.

The review did not claim a direct export from Scopus or Web of Science, as such exports were unavailable. Publisher or institutional links were used for verification, not as evidence of systematic searches. The final corpus includes reputable public relations and communication journals, such as Journal of Public Relations Research, Public Relations Review, and others.

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3.3 Search strategy

Search concepts were derived from review questions and OPR literature, combining public relations and relational terms, antecedents, communication, and institutional applications. Both British and American spellings of organisation/organization were included. Because SciSpace employs semantic retrieval, we also used natural-language Boolean expressions. Exact search strategies are detailed below for reproducibility in databases like Scopus and Web of Science.

Table 1: Search strategy and documented record capture. The captured-record column represents the review log used for screening, not the total number of hits available in each discovery service.

Search set	Core search expression	Purpose	Captured records
S1	"public relations" AND "relationship management"	Core theoretical literature	10
S2	("organization-public relationship*" OR "organisation-public relationship*")	OPR concept and measurement	10
S3	"relationship cultivation" AND "public relations"	Cultivation strategies and maintenance	10
S4	(trust OR transparency OR authenticity OR openness OR engagement) AND "organization-public relationship*"	Relational antecedents and outcomes	10
S5	("dialogic communication" OR "two-way symmetrical" OR interactivity) AND "public relations" AND relationship*	Dialogue and digital relationship processes	10
S6	("employee-organization relationship*" OR government OR nonprofit OR "public diplomacy") AND "public relations" AND relationship*	Institutional and contextual extensions	10
Supplementary	Google Scholar exact-phrase and author/title searching	Citation chasing and omitted studies	20
Publisher/ Citation chasing	ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis, Emerald and SAGE DOI/journal pages plus backward/forward references	Verification and additional eligible records	26

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3.4 Eligibility criteria

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication period	Journal articles dated 2000 – 2025 inclusive	Before 2000 or after 2025; older foundational works could be cited only as background
Publication status	Peer-reviewed journal article or peer-reviewed systematic/meta-analytic review	Book chapters, books, dissertations, theses, conference papers, editorials, repository-only manuscripts
Substantive focus	Relationship management, OPRs, relationship quality, cultivation, dialogue, engagement, employee-organisation relationships or directly related relational constructs in PR/strategic communication	Marketing/customer relationship studies without a public-relations or strategic-communication relationship construct
Outcomes/constructs	At least one relational antecedent, process, dimension or consequence	Communication studies that mentioned relationships only incidentally
Language	English	No accessible English bibliographic/abstract information
Source verification	Journal and bibliographic details traceable to an established publisher or journal record with DOI where available	Unverifiable journal or publication provenance

3.5 Study selection and PRISMA flow

The review log recorded 106 records: 60 from six SciSpace searches, 20 from Google Scholar, and 26 from publisher searches and citation chasing. After removing 37 duplicates, 69 unique records remained for screening. Thirty-one were excluded for being outside the focus or non-journal items. Thirty-eight reports advanced to eligibility assessment; eight were excluded for not focusing on relationship management or for being non-peer-reviewed, resulting in 30 studies for qualitative synthesis as detailed below.

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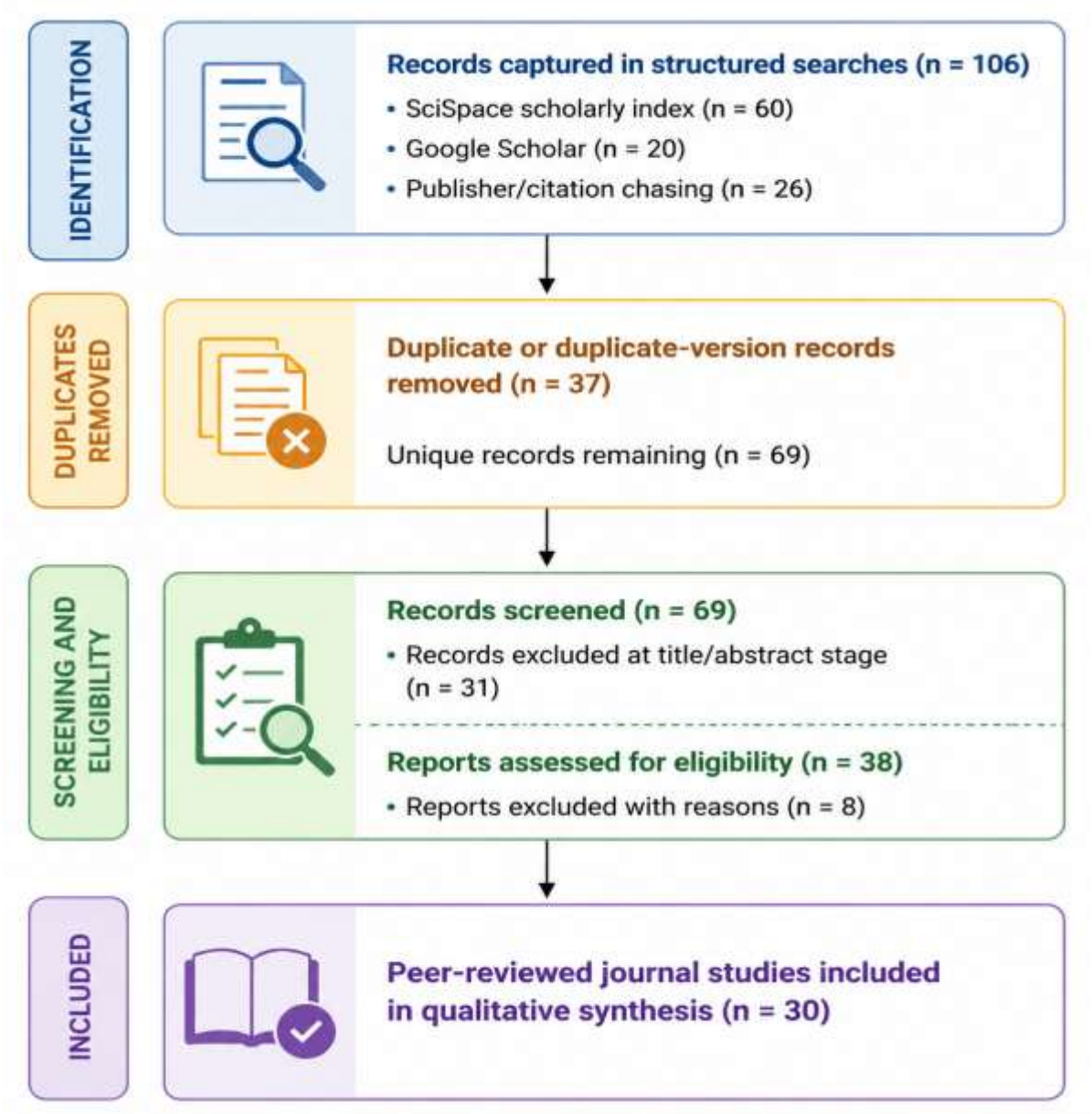


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020-compatible flow of the documented screening set.

3.6 Data extraction and synthesis

The review extracted data from each study, including year, journal, context, research design, sample or analysis unit, relational construct, key findings, and contribution to relationship-management theory. Studies were compared via thematic synthesis, with initial codes covering theoretical development, measurement, cultivation strategies, digital/dialogic communication, internal relationships, contexts, and outcomes. These were refined to find recurring mechanisms and disagreements. Meta-analytic effect sizes were not re-estimated because of study heterogeneity and existing recent meta-analyses synthesising the main correlational evidence.

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3.7 Methodological appraisal The corpus includes various study types like articles, scale studies, surveys, models, content analyses, experiments, interviews, reviews, and meta-analyses. A single risk-of-bias tool would be inappropriate across these designs. Instead, five design-sensitive questions guided appraisal: clarity of research question, description of sampling, transparency of operationalised relational constructs, alignment of analysis with design, and acknowledgement of limitations. No studies were excluded due to methodological weaknesses. Appraisals influenced the weight given to findings, with cautious interpretation of single-organisation, cross-sectional, self-report studies compared with replicated or meta-analysed studies. This approach aligns with Cheng's (2018) note that such designs dominate OPR research.

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of the evidence base

The 30 studies show a shift from conceptualisation and measurement towards application, comparison, and synthesis over time. From 2000–2004, the focus was mainly on measurement and theory. Between 2005–2009, the emphasis expanded to validation, relationship types, dialogue, and strategies. From 2010–2014, scholarship linked OPRs to politics, social media, and cross-cultural contexts. From 2015 onward, research increasingly explored dialogue, nonprofit relationships, public diplomacy, and digital platforms. The 2020–2025 period, which includes the largest portion of studies, features crisis/pandemic research, government PR, bibliometric mapping, corporate diplomacy, meta-analysis, CSR/intergroup studies, and PR consultancy relationships. This pattern aligns with Ki, Ertem-Eray, and Hayden's (2023) evidence of sharp growth in relationship-management publications after 2010.

The final corpus covers five journals: Journal of Public Relations Research (n=16), Public Relations Review (n=8), International Journal of Strategic Communication (n=4), Journal of Communication Management (n=1), and International Journal of Business Communication (n=1). All records were verified via publisher or official pages.

Publication period	Studies (n)	Relative bar
2000–2004	3	■■■
2005–2009	7	■■■■■■■
2010–2014	6	■■■■■■
2015–2019	5	■■■■■
2020–2025	9	■■■■■■■■■

Figure 2: Distribution of the 30 included studies by publication period. Each square represents one included study.

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Table 3: Characteristics and contributions of the 30 included studies.

Study and Journal	Design, context and relational focus	Principal contribution
Huang (2001) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Cross-cultural scale development; surveys n=535 plus 32 interviews Relational focus: OPRA; trust, satisfaction, commitment, control mutuality and cultural dimensions	Established a validated cross-cultural measurement approach and demonstrated that relationship quality could be operationalised systematically.
Ledingham (2003) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Conceptual/theoretical review Relational focus: Relationship management as general theory	Argued that relationship management provides a coherent general theory linking public relations processes to relational states and outcomes.
Bruning & Galloway (2003) Public Relations Review	Design/context: Survey; n=135; factor analysis Relational focus: Expanded OPR scale and commitment	Identified five relational dimensions and reinforced the need to measure personal and structural commitment.
Jo, Hon, & Brunner (2005) Journal of Communication Management	Design/context: Measurement validation in university setting Relational focus: Trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, commitment, exchange and communal relationships	Supported the reliability of a six-factor OPR instrument in a university-public context.
Hung (2005) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: 40 qualitative interviews across multinational companies in China/Taiwan Relational focus: Relationship types	Identified mutual, communal, covenantal, contractual, symbiotic, manipulative and exploitative relationship types, extending simple communal/exchange distinctions.
Jo (2006) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Manufacturer-retailer validation study, South Korea Relational focus: Cross-cultural OPR measurement	Found trust, satisfaction and commitment to travel across contexts, while personal network captured culturally specific relational features.
Ki & Shin (2006) Public Relations Review	Design/context: Content analysis/review of OPR scholarship Relational focus: State of OPR research	Documented rapid development of OPR research and called for replication, extension and cumulative theory building.

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Huang (2008) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Crisis communication study Relational focus: Trust and relational commitment	Showed that prior relational conditions and crisis responses affect trust and commitment, linking relationship management to crisis contexts.
Bruning, Dials, & Shirka (2008) Public Relations Review	Design/context: Empirical survey study Relational focus: Dialogue and relationship attitudes	Found that relationship attitudes and dialogue positively influenced organisational evaluations and intended behaviour.
Ki & Hon (2009) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Scale development/validation Relational focus: Relationship cultivation strategies	Developed a reliable multi-item measure of day-to-day cultivation strategies, allowing relationship maintenance to be tested empirically.
Seltzer & Zhang (2011) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Telephone survey; registered voters n=508 Relational focus: Political OPRs	Found that trust, mediated/interpersonal communication and dialogue predicted the strength of citizen-party relationships.
Men & Hung (2012) International Journal of Strategic Communication	Design/context: Qualitative elite interviews/conceptual integration Relational focus: OPRs in strategic management	Demonstrated how OPRs contribute to analysis, formulation, implementation and strategic control through information, support and feedback.
Men & Tsai (2013) International Journal of Strategic Communication	Design/context: Survey/model testing; Chinese social networking users Relational focus: Social media engagement and relational outcomes	Supported an integrated model linking social media dependency, parasocial interaction and community identification to engagement and relational outcomes.
Pratt & Omenugha (2014) International Journal of Strategic Communication	Design/context: Comparative theory-informed case analysis; Sudan and Nigeria Relational focus: Relationship management in ethnoreligious conflict	Applied relationship management to African conflict settings and argued for communication strategies capable of engaging divided stakeholder groups.

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Men & Stacks (2014) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Employee survey/SEM Relational focus: Leadership, transparency and employee-organisation relationships	Found that authentic leadership encouraged symmetrical and transparent communication, which strengthened employee trust, commitment, satisfaction and control mutuality.
Men & Tsai (2014) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Survey/model testing of corporate social networking sites Relational focus: Engagement, authenticity, transparency, advocacy	Found positive effects of engagement on authenticity, transparency, OPR quality and advocacy; OPRs linked engagement to advocacy.
Yang, Kang, & Cha (2015) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Two online surveys; n=704 Relational focus: Organisation-public dialogic communication scale	Validated a 28-item dialogic communication measure and demonstrated significant links between dialogue, trust and distrust.
Pressgrove & McKeever (2016) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Stakeholder survey; n=660 Relational focus: Nonprofit stewardship, loyalty and behaviour	Extended nonprofit OPR models by linking cultivation strategies and relationship quality to loyalty and behavioural intentions.
Storie (2018) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: 32 in-depth interviews with public-diplomacy communication officers Relational focus: Public diplomacy relationship cultivation	Confirmed established cultivation dimensions but also showed that goals, trust and inter-organisational competition shape public-diplomacy relationships.
Wirtz & Zimbres (2018) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Systematic analysis of 79 peer-reviewed studies Relational focus: Digital dialogic communication	Found heavy dependence on content analysis and warned researchers not to equate digital features with genuine dialogue.
Cheng (2018) Public Relations Review	Design/context: Comprehensive review of 156 OPR studies Relational focus: OPR antecedents, outcomes, process, structure	Identified dyadic assumptions, cross-sectional dominance, unilateral self-report and measurement limitations; proposed contingent OPR thinking.

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Marschlich & Ingenhoff (2021) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: 25 in-depth interviews; United Arab Emirates Relational focus: Corporate diplomacy, cultivation and legitimacy	Connected relationship cultivation and cultural responsiveness to organisational legitimacy in corporate diplomacy.
Huang, Lynn, Dong, Ni, & Men (2023) International Journal of Business Communication	Design/context: Content analysis: 756 Weibo and 645 Twitter/X posts from Fortune 500 firms Relational focus: Cross-cultural social media cultivation during COVID-19	Found that openness and access affected engagement differently across China and the United States, demonstrating cultural contingency in digital cultivation.
Dong, Zheng, & Morehouse (2023) Public Relations Review	Design/context: Systematic review/bibliometric analysis of 155 GPR articles Relational focus: Government public relations	Found government PR to be growing but under-theorised, with strong roots in relationship management and substantial contextual research needs.
Ki, Ertem-Eray, & Hayden (2023) Public Relations Review	Design/context: Bibliometric analysis; 219 articles and 22,926 citations Relational focus: Development of relationship-management scholarship	Confirmed strong post-2010 growth and identified frameworks, measurement and theory advancement as dominant intellectual themes.
Zhan & Zhao (2023) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Meta-analysis Relational focus: Openness, engagement and OPRs	Reported corrected mean correlations of .52 –.72 between openness and OPR dimensions and .30 –.42 between engagement and OPRs, with contextual moderation.
Ma, Ma, & Liu (2023) Public Relations Review	Design/context: Meta-analysis; 454 correlations, 67 studies, N=30,223 Relational focus: Antecedents and consequences of OPRs	Confirmed strong links between OPRs and engagement, authenticity, transparency, interactivity, symmetrical communication, reputation, advocacy and other consequences.
Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2023) International Journal of Strategic Communication	Design/context: Survey/SEM; 287 hotel employees in Iran Relational focus: Internal communication, emotional culture and EORs	Found that symmetrical and responsive communication strengthens emotional culture and employee-organisation relationships, which supports employee advocacy.

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Xu (2024) Public Relations Review	Design/context: Experiment with moderated mediation Relational focus: CSR, identity and OPRs	Showed that CSR can influence relational outcomes through identity congruity and self-expansion, while intergroup identity threat changes the indirect effect.
Ziegele (2025) Journal of Public Relations Research	Design/context: Literature synthesis plus qualitative practitioner analysis Relational focus: Consultancy-client relationship quality	Extended relationship-quality thinking to consultancy-client relationships and proposed a multidimensional framework beyond conflict-based evaluation.

4.2 Theme 1: Theoretical consolidation and the measurement of relationship quality

Post-2000 studies focused on quantifying the relational perspective, with Huang's (2001) OPRA scale which combined theory with cross-cultural measurement, with indicators showing that relational research extends beyond impressionistic claims. Validation centred on trust, satisfaction, commitment, and mutual control (Jo et al., 2005; Jo, 2006). Bruning and Galloway (2003) added personal and structural commitments, community improvement, professional benefits, and alternative comparisons. Though dimensions vary, these studies agree that public relations builds value by enhancing relationship quality and stability, not just awareness.

Ledingham's (2003) contribution expanded the meaning of measurement efforts, suggesting relationship management becomes a broad theory when relationships link organisational behaviour, communication, and outcomes. While later literature supports this, it also complicates it. Hung (2005) identified different relationship types, from mutual and covenantal to manipulative and exploitative, indicating that high scores on a generic scale do not necessarily reflect moral character, benefit distribution, or power. Cheng (2018) argued that dominant OPR models can idealise mutual benefit and overlook changing, multi-party, and contingent relations. Recent research on consultancy-client relationships (Ziegele, 2025) shows relational quality must sometimes be tailored to professional contexts rather than universally applied.

The field's maturation is visible in synthesis research. Ki et al. (2023) found 219 relationship-management articles across six major public relations journals and showed that the field's intellectual centre consists of framework development, scale validation, and theory testing. Ma et al. (2023) then provided meta-analytic confirmation that the familiar dimensions of trust, satisfaction, commitment and control mutuality have accumulated substantial empirical support. The theoretical issue is therefore no longer whether relationship quality can be measured. A more demanding question concerns whether existing measures capture changing relationship forms, power differences, multiple publics, cultural expectations and long-term relational change.

4.3 Theme 2: Cultivation strategies, openness, dialogue and symmetrical communication

The literature distinguishes relationship quality from communication practices that cultivate relationships. Ki and Hon (2009) developed strategies like access, openness, assurance, networking, positivity, and shared tasks to test their link to OPR quality. Work on dialogue supports this logic; Bruning et al. (2008) showed dialogue and positive attitudes improved

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evaluations and intentions. Yang et al. (2015) created a dialogue scale tied to trust and distrust. These studies indicate dialogue is more than an ideal; it can be operationalised and linked to relational states.

Two-way symmetrical communication explains these findings by suggesting that organisations learn from publics and stay open to change, rather than one-way persuasion. Men and Stacks (2014) found that transparent internal communication enhances employee relationships. Seltzer and Zhang (2011) found that dialogic, interpersonal, and mediated communication predict stronger citizen-party ties. The value of two-way communication therefore lies in creating access, responsiveness, information, and mutual influence, not just message exchange.

The strongest current evidence on openness and engagement shows they positively relate to OPRs. Zhan and Zhao's (2023) meta-analysis found correlations between openness and OPR dimensions from .52 to .72, and between engagement and OPRs from .30 to .42, varying by organizational context. Ma et al. (2023) concluded that engagement, authenticity, interactivity, transparency, and communication types all strongly connect with OPRs. These findings suggest that communication fosters relationships when publics perceive it as open, authentic, interactive, and responsive.

4.4 Theme 3: Digital relationship management and the limits of technological interactivity

Digital platforms transformed organisation-public interactions. However, literature warns against equating technical interactivity with relational dialogue. Men and Tsai (2013) found social media engagement links media dependency, parasocial interaction, and community identification to trust, satisfaction, and commitment. Their later study showed engagement with corporate social networking pages boosts perceived authenticity and transparency, with OPR quality influencing advocacy behaviour (Men & Tsai, 2014). These findings suggest digital communication supports relationship management when publics see it as socially meaningful, not just plentiful.

Wirtz and Zimbres (2018) identified a weakness in digital dialogic research, noting that most of 79 studies relied on content analysis, often inferring dialogue from website or social-media features. However, features like comment boxes or social accounts do not confirm listening, response, or change. Relationship management requires distinguishing communication tools from relational processes, as technically interactive entities may still communicate hierarchically, while less advanced ones can build stronger relationships through responsiveness and access.

Cross-cultural research supports this. Huang et al. (2023) analyzed 756 Weibo posts and 645 Twitter/X posts from Fortune 500 companies in China and the U.S. Both groups used openness, but it was more effective in the U.S., while access was more important in China. Their China-focused research showed access predicted engagement during COVID-19. Digital strategies vary across cultures, as platform features interact with cultural norms, crises, and relationships.

4.5 Theme 4: Internal communication and employee-organisation relationships

Relationship management extends inward as employees, though organisational members, are strategic publics whose trust and advocacy impact performance and reputation. Men and Stacks (2014) linked authentic leadership to transparent internal communication, fostering trust, commitment, satisfaction, and mutual control. This model shows relationship quality mediates

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leadership communication outcomes, as trust is influenced by accountable, participatory communication environments, not just frequent speech.

Ghorbanzadeh et al. (2023) extended this argument in an Iranian hotel context. Symmetrical and responsive leadership communication supported a positive emotional culture, which strengthened employee-organisation relationships and employee advocacy. The study broadens relationship management in two respects. First, it provides evidence from a non-Western organisational environment. Second, it introduces emotional culture as an intervening mechanism. Employee relationships therefore depend on more than information flow. They are also shaped by affective conditions and by whether employees interpret organisational communication as responsive and respectful.

Internal relationship research highlights a methodological concern: many studies rely on cross-sectional surveys, making causal claims hard. Consistent associations across samples are promising, but longitudinal studies are needed to see if communication affects relationship quality over time and if improvements lead to advocacy, retention, or performance. This mirrors the field's dependence on self-report designs identified by Cheng (2018).

4.6 Theme 5: Political, government, nonprofit and international relationship management

Relational theory has expanded from corporate contexts to broader areas. Seltzer and Zhang's (2011) political OPR model showed that citizens can assess political parties via relational factors and outcomes. Storie (2018) found that public diplomacy relies on trust, organisational goals, and inter-organisational competition. Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2021) linked relationship cultivation to legitimacy in UAE corporate diplomacy. These studies indicate that relationship management extends beyond corporate stakeholders, and that institutional purpose shapes what defines a successful relationship.

Government communication is vital because public institutions operate under democratic, legal, and public-good constraints that differ from corporate settings. Dong, Zheng, and Morehouse (2023) reviewed 155 government PR articles from 1976 to 2021, and found that while government PR is growing, it remains under-theorised, with strong roots in relationship management. For government bodies, relational effectiveness involves accountability, public value, political contestation, equity, legitimacy, and communicating with citizens.

Nonprofit scholarship makes a similar contribution. Pressgrove and McKeever (2016) extended OPR models to loyalty and behavioural intentions among nonprofit stakeholders. Their work shows that relational outcomes can predict behaviours that matter directly to mission-driven organisations, including continued support. However, nonprofit and development organisations also depend on communities whose expectations may involve participation, representation and fairness, not only loyalty. This is one reason public-sector and development research should not simply import corporate scales without testing their conceptual fit.

The African evidence remains limited. Pratt and Omenugha (2014) applied relationship management to ethnoreligious conflict in Sudan and Nigeria, demonstrating the relevance of stakeholder engagement to nation-building and conflict management. This contribution matters because it situates relationship theory in environments marked by political division and social conflict. However, a small number of African studies cannot establish whether dominant OPR

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measures capture local understandings of trust, authority, community obligation, state legitimacy or public participation. The imbalance between the size and diversity of African public institutions and the small amount of relationship-management research centred on them remains a significant research gap.

4.7 Theme 6: Relational consequences: reputation, advocacy, loyalty and legitimacy

The field's strongest claim is that relationship quality holds great significance because it predicts outcomes that organisations and publics value. Ma et al. (2023) found strong connections between OPRs and reputation, attitudes, positive word-of-mouth, purchase intentions, advocacy and information seeking. Pressgrove and McKeever (2016) linked nonprofit relationship management to loyalty and behavioural intentions. Men and Tsai (2014) positioned OPR quality as an important mechanism through which social-media engagement influences advocacy. Marschlich and Ingenhoff (2021) connected cultivation practices to organisational legitimacy. These results collectively support the strategic value of relationship management, although the specific outcome depends on organisational purpose.

Trust is both a relationship quality and a communication outcome. Huang (2008) linked relational conditions to crisis trust and commitment, while Yang et al. (2015) connected dialogic communication to trust and distrust. In internal communication, transparency and symmetrical communication predict employee trust. Trust is an ongoing relational state influencing future perceptions and can be strengthened or weakened by new experiences, making longitudinal studies essential.

Recent work extends beyond traditional reputation outcomes. Xu (2024) found that CSR influences relational outcomes through identity congruity and self-expansion, with identity threat modifying these effects. Relationship quality depends on interactions among organisations, issues, and publics. Publics assess relationships based on organisational communication and the meanings of actions for their identities and other groups. This challenges the view that OPRs are independent dyads and supports a networked, socially embedded relationship management model.

5. Integrated Interpretation

Across 30 studies, relationship management is a conditional pathway, not just a simple communication-effects model. Institutional and cultural conditions influence which communication practices publics see as appropriate. Practices like openness, access, transparency, authenticity, listening, interactivity, and symmetrical communication foster dialogue, engagement, and participation. These processes affect relationship quality, mainly trust, satisfaction, commitment, and mutual control, though relationship type and cultural dimensions also matter. Relationship quality then impacts outcomes like reputation, advocacy, loyalty, legitimacy, supportive behaviour, and information seeking, which in turn shape expectations during crises or organisational change.

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Stage	Constructs represented in the synthesis
Context	Culture; organisational type; public-sector constraints; crisis; issue identity; power
Communication practices	Openness; transparency; authenticity; access; symmetrical communication; responsiveness
Relational processes	Dialogue; engagement; listening; participation; interaction; cultivation
Relationship quality	Trust; satisfaction; commitment; control mutuality; communal/exchange or context-specific qualities
Outcomes	Reputation; legitimacy; advocacy; loyalty; supportive behaviour; information seeking

Figure 3: Integrated relationship-management pathway derived from the synthesis. The model is recursive: stakeholder outcomes and organisational behaviour shape subsequent relational expectations.

6. Discussion

The review shows that relationship management is more than a metaphor for good public relations. It now has a recognised theory, validated measurement methods, cultivation strategies, digital and internal uses, public-sector extensions, and meta-analytic support. Ledingham's (2003) idea that relationship management could be a general public relations theory is well-supported. The theory persists because it explains a key issue: public relations builds organisational value over time through relationships, not just immediate knowledge gains or media visibility.

Relationship management should not be seen as a closed theory. While trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality are useful, studies by Hung (2005), Jo (2006), Cheng (2018), and Xu (2024) show that relationships vary by culture, type, context, and interactions among publics. The field must differentiate between core principles and context-specific aspects. For example, trust is broadly relevant, but behaviours that convey trustworthiness differ across settings like corporate, government, political, and community. Similarly, control mutuality assumes publics value influence, but its meaning varies among customers, employees, citizens, and communities affected by development.

The review clarifies the link between Relationship Management Theory and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model, which sees symmetry as one communication approach that supports relationship quality, not a full replacement for relationship theory. Meta-analyses show symmetry and two-way communication relate to OPRs (Ma et al., 2023), while studies show transparency, dialogue, and responsiveness foster trust and commitment. However, symmetry does not mean organisations and publics have equal resources or power. Public relations can provide access, feedback, and opportunities for adjustment, even when power is unequal, which is especially important in government, development, and crisis situations.

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Excellence Theory adds a layer by emphasising that public relations creates more value when communication professionals engage in decision-making, environmental scanning, and organisational learning. Men and Hung (2012) support this by showing how OPRs assist with strategic analysis, formulation, implementation, and control. Relationship management explains how excellent PR boosts organisational effectiveness, as strong relationships supply information, support implementation, identify conflicts, and provide feedback. Relationships are not just communication outcomes; they are resources that enhance strategic sensing and adaptation.

Digital communication presents both opportunities and challenges. Social media enables observation and provides behavioural data; however, Wirtz and Zimbres (2018) indicate that much digital research quantifies features rather than dialogues. Men and Tsai illustrate that engagement can enhance authenticity, transparency, relationship quality, and advocacy, provided that the engagement is meaningful. Huang et al. (2023) reveal that cultivation strategies differ across cultures. Future research should prioritise responsiveness, active listening, follow-through, and stakeholder influence rather than focusing only on technological features.

Public-sector research requires a more substantial theoretical extension. Dong et al. (2023) show that government public relations is strongly linked to relationship management but lacks a fully developed identity. This gap matters because public institutions differ from corporations in their obligations. A government institution must communicate with supportive, indifferent and hostile publics; it must act under legal constraints; and it often has coercive or regulatory power. A citizen's relationship with a government institution therefore cannot be understood simply as a voluntary exchange. Relationship quality in government should incorporate procedural fairness, accountability, responsiveness, voice and public value alongside trust and satisfaction.

Development organisations face questions about resource dependency, political structures, long timelines, and expertise gaps. Public relations should be seen as ongoing consultation, explanation, feedback, and response. An evaluation should focus on stakeholder access to decision-makers, responsiveness to complaints, transparency about constraints, and perceived credibility. These measures link public relations to legitimacy and effectiveness.

The geographic distribution of evidence shows that relationship management research is not limited to Western contexts, with studies from China, Taiwan, South Korea, Iran, and the UAE supporting this. However, the body of research still hinges largely on U.S.-developed theories, scales, and samples. African research is limited despite its importance to public institutions, humanitarian efforts, conflicts, extractive industries, and development. Pratt and Omenugha (2014) highlight relational theory's potential in Sudan and Nigeria, but more comparative studies are needed. Future African research should carefully test existing scales and explore relational dimensions tied to local political, social, and cultural contexts.

The literature has made significant progress but still relies heavily on cross-sectional surveys. While scale validation and structural equation modelling improve construct measurement, they cannot establish causation. Relationships are inherently longitudinal, with trust, commitment, crises, and repeated responses shaping future perceptions. Panel studies, repeated measures, longitudinal fieldwork, and multi-wave digital trace designs are especially valuable. Dyadic data should also expand, measuring both organisational and public perceptions simultaneously and examining discrepancies.

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The review supports shifting from dyadic to networked relationship management. Xu (2024) shows intergroup identity can alter effects. Governments and organisations interact with multiple groups that influence each other. Communities assess institutions partly through their treatment of others; employees affect reputation; activists reshape information environments. Techniques like network analysis, multi-level modelling, and comparative case studies help move beyond the idea that each organisation-public dyad operates independently.

The evidence suggests ethical quality warrants greater focus. Extensive communication can exist in manipulative or exploitative relationships. Relationship management must differentiate engagement from ethics. Trustworthy public relations need alignment between communication and behaviour. Transparency alone, without accountability, risks superficiality, and dialogue without response can cause consultation fatigue. Future theories should consider ethical conduct, fairness, and commitment fulfilment as core to relationship quality.

7. Research Agenda

Table 4: Proposed research agenda for relationship-management scholarship.

Priority	Research direction
Longitudinal relationship dynamics	Replace one-time surveys with panel, repeated-measure and longitudinal qualitative designs that can show how trust, satisfaction and commitment change after organisational actions, crises and policy decisions.
Public-sector and development contexts	Develop and validate relationship measures for government institutions, development commissions, humanitarian organisations and public service institutions, including accountability, procedural fairness, voice and public value.
African and other under-represented settings	Test the cultural validity of dominant OPR measures across African countries and examine locally meaningful dimensions of legitimacy, communal obligation, authority, trust and participation.
Multi-public and networked relationships	Move beyond isolated dyads by studying how relationships among publics, stakeholder coalitions and organisational networks shape OPR outcomes.
Behavioural and organisational data	Combine surveys with response-time data, complaint records, consultation outcomes, digital interaction traces, retention, participation and advocacy behaviour.
Power and ethics	Examine whether access, dialogue and transparency produce actual stakeholder influence and whether relationship cultivation is supported by fair organisational behaviour.

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Artificial intelligence and mediated relationships	Study how chatbots, generative AI, automated service agents and algorithmic communication affect authenticity, trust, transparency and perceptions of organisational listening.
Comparative institutional research	Compare corporations, governments, nonprofits and development organisations using common core measures while allowing institution-specific relational dimensions.

8. Practical Implications

For public relations, communication volume should not be the main success indicator. Organisations should measure relational outcomes directly, tracking trust, satisfaction, commitment, influence, openness, responsiveness, and access over time and across stakeholder groups. When trust drops, practitioners should examine underlying organisational behaviours rather than assuming more messaging can fix the relationship.

Digital engagement strategies should be evaluated by relational quality, not just follower counts. Response rate, listening, resolution, and changes after feedback show relationship management. Internal communicators should treat employees as relational publics and promote transparent, participatory communication. Government and development communicators should focus on access, explanation, complaint response, inclusion, and visible follow-through, as legitimacy depends on stakeholders feeling communication leads to action.

The integrated pathway guides evaluation by helping practitioners identify contextual conditions, control communication practices, measure dialogue and engagement, assess relationship quality, and examine outcomes. It links communication to relational mechanisms and distinguishes communication issues from broader organizational problems.

9. Limitations of the Review

This review has limitations. It relied on a search combining scholarly discovery tools, Google Scholar, and citation chasing, not direct exports from databases like Scopus or Web of Science. So, it only reports records captured and screened, not all articles from 25 years. English-only eligibility may under-represent non-English research. The broad scope required synthesis across diverse designs, making a single quantitative estimate inappropriate. While publisher and abstract details verified provenance and methods, some paywalled full texts were inaccessible. These limits suggest cautious interpretation.

10. Conclusion

Since 2000, evidence shows relationship management is a key area in public relations, evolving from defining and measuring organisation-public ties to testing strategies, digital and internal communication, and extending into political and governmental contexts, with studies highlighting trust, satisfaction, commitment, openness, transparency, engagement, authenticity, and communication as crucial. Strong relationships boost reputation, advocacy, loyalty, legitimacy, and supportive behaviours.

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Theoretical maturity does not mean completion, as research still relies too heavily on cross-sectional self-report data and mainly reflects corporate and Western contexts. Public institutions, development organisations, humanitarian actors, and African settings offer key opportunities to test theory because their relationships involve accountability, political constraints, community participation, and unequal power. Future research should shift from applying established scales universally to developing comparative, longitudinal, and context-sensitive relationship models.

Public relations is best seen as strategic relationship management that links communication to listening, responsiveness, and behaviour. It adds value not just by creating messages, but by helping organisations understand stakeholder expectations, build credible interaction, respond to conflict, and maintain relationships that support organisational and public goals.

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