Scale development for measuring stance as degree of accommodation

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Abstract

This study develops a multiple-item scale for measuring public relations stance, as the starting point for making strategies and tactics. Following the conceptualization and operationalization of stance as degree of accommodation, one judge panel and two PRSA member survey data sets are employed for scale development and testing. The scale’s reliability, factorial structure and validity are further assessed. This systematic procedure provides a valid and reliable scale with two clusters of enactments of stance: action-based accommodation and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation. This scale can be used by practitioners to measure the organization and its publics’ willingness to take accommodation in a given situation, as well as how these stances evolve and/or persist longitudinally.

Keywords: Public relations stance; Contingency theory; Accommodation; Scale development; Measurement

1. Introduction

Stance, as a key concept in understanding public relations practice, has been of great interests to researchers. According to Cameron and his colleagues, stance moves along the continuum of accommodation. Organizations practice a variety of stances with its publics at any given point, and these stances change, depending on the circumstances. The continuum has two ends as advocacy and accommodation, which represents the willingness to make concessions or give or offer trade-offs: at one end the organization pleads its case and at the other makes overtures toward a trade-off or toward concessions. One key argument of contingency theory is the disentanglement of stance from the cluster of strategies and tactics. Unlike strategies and tactics, stance is operationalized as the position an organization takes in decision-making, which is supposed to determine which strategy or tactic to employ. As a construct distinct from strategy, public relations stance is also to be measured, as the starting point for making strategies and tactics. However, there is a lack of any multiple-item scale or inventory being developed and tested in terms of evaluative qualities. For researchers and practitioners, a scale specifically measuring stance is needed for better understanding of public relations practice.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to develop a multiple-item scale for measuring public relations stance, which would meet reliability and validity standards and can be applied in public relations practice. This paper first

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conceptualizes stance into the poles of advocacy and accommodation, with the concept of accommodation as the focus of this scale development. Specifically, stance is operationalized as the degree of accommodation or the willingness of taking accommodations toward publics in varied situations. One judge panel and two survey data sets (103 and 144 PRSA members, respectively) are employed to develop a reliable and valid scale to measure stance as degree of accommodation, and then its quality via systematic psychometric evaluation is assessed.

2. Results

In order to generate the initial pool of items for the stance scale, relevant literature on crisis communication, conflict management and public relations was reviewed and an initial pool of 54 scale items were compiled. Those items were mostly drawn from Shin’s (2003) study on conflict management stances and strategies and Huang’s (2004) study on measuring public relations strategies. A group of five public relations faculty and Ph.D. students at a large Midwestern university judged the content validity of the items. Each judge was presented with a written definition of stance with the 54 candidate scale items. Judges were then asked to rate each statement as being “clearly representative,” “somewhat representative,” or “not representative” of the construct definition. Items evaluated as clearly representative by three judges and no worse than somewhat representative by a fourth judge were retained. This process resulted in a set of 12 items for further analysis. In addition, the face validity of each item was also judged by each panel member.

This following study involved scale purification and reliability testing for the 12 items. Data were collected via a Web survey of a random sample drawn from Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) member’s directory (2002). The practitioners were asked to think of a public relations situation and one primary public they dealt with, and then their willingness of taking the twelve listed stance items. After testing the email links included in the sample, an initial mailing of deliverable 800 surveys was followed by a reminder email sent 1 week later. Usable responses were received from 103 public relations professionals resulting in an overall response rate of 13%. All items were scored using a seven-point Likert format with higher scores representing greater degree of accommodation (1, completely unwilling; 7, completely willing). After examining the distribution of each item and their initial factor loadings, two items were eliminated. For the remaining ten items, exploratory factor analyses indicated two factors: Action-based accommodations and Qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations, as two clusters of enactments of stance that were operationalized as degree of accommodation and willingness to take accommodations in this study. The resulting subscales demonstrated internal consistency coefficients (alphas) of .89 (5 items for factor 1) and .80 (5 items for factor 2). In addition, the inter-item correlations were moderate in magnitude within factor. The results indicate that the 10-item instrument measuring stance reflected satisfying internal consistency within each factor and the subscales for each cluster of stance enactments seemed reasonable and parsimonious.

A second Web survey was conducted to generate data for confirmatory factor analysis. Once again, a Web survey was mailed to a random sample of PRSA members (2004) excluding names sampled in the previous survey. As in the first survey, the practitioners were asked to think of a public relations situation and one primary public they dealt with, and then their willingness of taking the twelve listed stance items. After testing the email links included in the sample, an initial mailing of deliverable 1340 surveys was followed by a reminder email sent 1 week later. Usable responses were received from 144 public relations professionals resulting in an overall response rate of 11%. Confirmatory factor analysis of this two-factor 10-item model was examined using AMOS to evaluate the adequacy of the hypothesized factor structure, which demonstrated satisfactory fit of the data. Maximum likelihood estimation was employed. The extent to which an estimated model fits the observed data (item variance and covariance) was indicated by a variety of goodness-of-fit indices: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .91; Non-normed Fit Index (NNFI) = .88; Normed Fit Index (NFI) = .90. To compare the proposed model with its rival models, a two-factor oblique model was compared against two alternative models, a two-factor orthogonal model and a single-factor model, to determine the number of latent variables underlying response to items on a test. For model comparison, the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) was used to select the best fitting model. The null model served as a basis of reference for computing goodness-of-fit indices for the three competing models. The null model assumes no common variance among the 10 indicator items. The two-factor oblique model appeared to fit the data best (CFI = .91, compared to .76 for the two-factor orthogonal model and .88 for the one-factor model). For model comparison, the two-factor oblique model, among its competing models, provided the smallest AIC value and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) (AIC = 390.77, RMSEA = .12, compared to the orthogonal model: AIC = 868.18, RMSEA = .20, and the one-factor model: AIC = 474.40, RMSEA = .14).
In conclusion, CFA seemed to demonstrate that stance, operationalized as degree of accommodation and willingness of taking accommodations, was represented by two distinguishable but related clusters of enactments as Action-based accommodations (AA) and Qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations (QRA). More specifically, Action-based accommodations refer to stances enacted by agreeing with what the other party proposes, acceptance of the public’s suggestions, etc., while qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations weight more toward expressing regrets and qualifying the organization’s tendency of collaboration and so forth without explicitly taking concrete actions. The oblique nature of the inter-factor correlations reflects that both stance enactments, though each capturing different aspects of stance, are consistently measuring the degree of accommodation toward the public as the contingency theory proposed. The corresponding coefficient alpha estimates of internal consistency reliability for the two factors were .89 for AA and .79 for QRA, which demonstrated acceptable internal consistency according to Clark and Watson (1995)’s .80 or higher Alpha standard.

Thus, this study developed a scale for measuring stance as degree of accommodation, which advances contingency theory at the measurement level. This systematic scale development and psychometric assessment procedure provides a valid and reliable scale with two clusters of enactments of stance in terms of action-based accommodation and qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodation:

“Given the situation, I will be ________ (1, completely unwilling; 7, completely willing)”: 

AA: Action-based Accommodations:
To yield to the public’s demands.
To agree to follow what the public proposed.
To accept the publics’ propositions.
To agree with the public on future action or procedure.
To agree to try the solutions suggested by the public.

QRA: Qualified-Rhetoric-mixed Accommodations:
To express regret or apologize to the public.
To collaborate with the public in order to solve the problem at hand.
To change my own position toward that of the public.
To make concessions with the public.
To admit wrongdoing.

Therefore, in a given situation and for a given public, a public relations practitioner’s stance varies in the degree of how much he or she “will be ________ (1, completely unwilling; 7, completely willing)”: (1) to take action-based accommodations as yielding to the public’s demands, agreeing to follow what the public proposed, accepting the publics’ propositions, agreeing with the public on future action or procedure, and agreeing to try the solutions suggested by the public; and how much he or she “will be ________ (1, completely unwilling; 7, completely willing)” and (2) to take qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations as expressing regret or apologizing to the public, collaborating with the public in order to solve the problem at hand, changing his or her own position toward that of the public, making concessions with the public, and admitting wrongdoing. The two indexes capture the domain of accommodation as one key aspect of stance movement on the contingency continuum.

Public relations professionals can use this scale to measure the organization and its publics’ degree of accommodation or willingness to take accommodation in a given situation, as well as how these stances evolve and/or persist longitudinally. As this study suggests, public relations professionals might take or adjust different stance enactments upon different situations so as to make optimal decisions on prioritizing action-based or qualified-rhetoric-mixed accommodations. Future research on stance movement may cross-validate this scale and further identify other enactments of stance to fully capture the domain of both accommodation and advocacy along the contingency continuum. Further tests on criterion validity, convergent validity and discriminate validity (especially against the concepts of strategy and tactics) of this scale will make the stance scale a more rigorous measurement of stance as degree of accommodation. Notably, the scale developed in this study operationalizes stance from the perspective of accommodation. To better capture the advocacy facets of the contingency continuum, future scale development and theory advancement efforts are needed.

A complete version of this study is available by request from Yan Jin at yjin@vcu.edu.