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# LOVE WINS: A LOVE LENS APPROACH TO CULTIVATION OF ORGANISATION-STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

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## ABSTRACT

This chapter adds to emerging research exploring the construct of joy by drawing attention to the value of more loving stakeholder relationships. Relationship management research has focussed attention on the antecedents, outcomes and quality of an organization’s relationships with various publics and stakeholders and has examined strategies that can nurture these relationships. However, not much of this research has addressed intimacy and passion in these relationships.

Accordingly, this chapter draws on the theory of brand love developed in relationship marketing research and the theory of love from psychological research to build a normative theory of organisation-stakeholder love (OSL) that can be applied to organisational relationships with publics and stakeholders. OSL theory switches emphasis from how organisations can attract stakeholder affection (e.g., love) toward organisations to how organisations can and should love their stakeholders. The proposition put forward in this chapter is that OSL can and should become a driving force behind organisations’ interactions with stakeholders, thus contributing to more ethical public relations practices.

OSL is important because it has the potential to contribute to addressing public relations’ image problems (e.g., relating to terms such as *spin*, *fake news*, and *corporate greenwashing*); it offers a new love orientation that guides organisations towards a focus on the primacy of stakeholder needs and values, which in turn may shape the way organisations initiate and manage their relationships with stakeholders. The chapter concludes with practical ways OSL can be implemented and offers a research agenda suggesting ways OSL may open up new research opportunities in public relations.

**Keywords:** ethical public relations, intimacy, love, organisational orientation, organisation-public relationships (OPRs), organisation-stakeholder relationships (OSRs)

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

1 Corinthians 13:13

## **INTRODUCTION**

Addressing the recent and welcome theme of *joy* in public relations research (e.g. the Euprera 2019 congress theme), this chapter draws attention not only to the foundational construct of *relationships* in public relations theory and practice, but more specifically to the value of closer loving relationships between organisations and their stakeholders. The logic is that positive emotions of *joy* and *love* are complementary attributes and desired outcomes of an organisation's relationship with stakeholders.

Three decades of research on organisation–public relationships (OPR; Ki and Hon, 2009; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998, 2000) and more recent research on organisation–stakeholder relationships (OSR; Slabbert and Barker, 2014) has examined how organisations can build and nurture positive relationships with publics and stakeholders. Extensive research in OPR studies has examined three main aspects of OPRs. First, research has focused on the antecedents of OPR (Bowen, Hung-Baesecke, and Chen, 2016; Broom et al., 1997; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001), addressing the question of why there is a need, and preconditions required, to establish relationships. Second, research addressed maintenance (Hon and Grunig, 1999) or cultivation strategies (Grunig, 2006) focusing on how to continue quality relationships (i.e., sustainability of relationships). Third, research has examined the outcomes of OPR relationship quality (Grunig and Huang, 2000), including relationship dimensions such as commitment, trust, openness, intimacy and passion (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998).

However, despite this breadth of research, what is still missing in public relations research is a deeper understanding of relationship intimacy. Ki and Shin's (2006) content analysis of OPR studies published between 1985 and 2001 found that only two studies focused on intimacy as a measurement variable and only one focused on emotions as a measurement variable. More widely, however, recent public relations studies have begun to examine stakeholder emotions and emotional engagement (Coombs and Holladay, 2015; Lievonen, Luoma-aho and Bowden, 2018).

This chapter draws on brand love research adopting Sternberg's (1986, 1988) theory of love (Bügel et al., 2011; Yim et al., 2008) as a framework to develop a normative theory (Kent and Li, 2020: 2) of love in public relations that can be applied to organisational relationships with publics and stakeholders.

Like stakeholder emotions research in public relations literature, brand love research sheds light on how organisations can attract love-like feelings from stakeholders. OSL theory switches emphasis from how organisations can nurture stakeholder affection (e.g., love) toward organisations to how organisations should first love their stakeholders. The proposition put forward in this chapter is that OSL, which can be adopted and implemented through organisational culture, systems, policies and practices, should become a guiding motive for how organisations interact with stakeholders.

Development of OSL theory contributes to relationship management research (Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison and Lesko, 1997; Ledingham, 2003), particularly to a better understanding of intimacy in stakeholder relationships. The construct of OSL also has the potential to contribute to more ethical public relations (Bowen, 2000; Seib and Fitzpatrick, 1995). The public relations profession is in dire need of increased attention to ethical practices and principles. Historically, public relations has been perceived as a manipulative and deceptive practice, which has given rise to terms such as *spin*, *fake news*, and *corporate greenwashing*. Critics have pointed to its prioritization of organisational benefits over the public good or public interest (Brunner & Smallwood, 2019) and to its focus on image over action. OSL theory contributes in some way toward addressing these challenges by offering a new love orientation that may shape the way organisations initiate and manage their relationships with stakeholders. It builds on and extends the stakeholder-centricity paradigm by introducing organizational love into the stakeholder relationship-building process, thus testing organisations' real motives for relationship cultivation strategies.

An organisation's orientation or stance towards stakeholders is important because it shapes its relationship with them (Shin et al., 2005) and guides how it treats them, including how it communicates with them. Public relations studies have explored organisations' orientations towards stakeholders and the effect this has on organisations' behaviors towards stakeholders. As an example, it has been widely argued that an organisation's 'strategic communication' orientation leads that organisation to treat stakeholders as a means to an end, which is understood as a more one-way asymmetrical communication model. A paradigmatic shift towards a more stakeholder-centric orientation complements a two-way symmetrical communication model that influences how organisations behave towards stakeholders. For example, an organisation's 'engagement' orientation influences its interaction with stakeholders; such an approach "guides the process of interactions among groups" (Taylor & Kent, 2014: 384). Kent and Taylor (2002, 2014) argue that 'dialogic engagement' is an organisational orientation that contributes to a more ethical approach towards stakeholders; dialogue is considered "'more ethical' because it is based on the principles of honesty, trust, and positive regard for the other rather than simply a conception of the public as a means to an end" (Kent & Taylor, 2002: 33).

The chapter is structured as follows. Following the introduction, it conducts a review of brand love studies that draw on Sternberg's theory of love (1986, 1988) and moves on to a review of public relations studies with a focus on intimacy, passion and commitment in organisations' relationships with stakeholders. The third section makes use of the integration of brand love theory and Sternberg's theory of love as a framework to develop OSL theory in relationship management specifically and public relations research more broadly. The fourth section leads a theoretical discussion about how a love orientation contributes to ethical organisational relationships with stakeholders. Finally, the chapter concludes with practical implications of how OSL can be implemented within organisations and offers a research agenda suggesting ways OSL may open up a range of research opportunities in public relations.

## **CONSUMERS' LOVE FOR ORGANISATIONS**

### ***Relationship Marketing Research On Brand Love***

To improve our understanding in public relations research of organisation-stakeholder relationship intimacy and passion, this chapter draws on constructs of *brand love* and *interpersonal love* explored in relationship marketing research and in psychological research. Early relationship marketing researchers observed how the tactics individuals employ to build and maintain healthy personal relationships could also improve the way organisations strategically instigate and build relationships with their customers, suppliers and even competitors. In her seminal work, Fournier (1998) offered a link between interpersonal relationships and organisation-consumer relationships, outlining a framework for characterizing and better understanding the types of relationships consumers form with brands. This gave marketing scholars and practitioners a new perspective with which to view customers and which changed their strategic approach to customers. Today, relationship marketing has become the dominant view in business marketing studies (Möller, 2010).

Due to its links to a relationship metaphor, relationship marketing researchers began to apply the construct of *love* to explore consumer-organisation relationships. Research on brand love has been substantial, particularly since 2005. These studies (e.g., Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006) used the term "love" to label consumers' "love-like" affection for particular brands. The intensity of these love-like affections ranges from liking brand-related objects to an intense emotional attachment with these objects. Although brand love has become a major topic in marketing, no universally accepted definition exists (Albert *et al.*, 2008; Batra *et al.*, 2012).

Both brand love and interpersonal love are an important focus in relationship marketing research because intense feelings are widely seen as a prerequisite for a long-lasting relationship (Shimp and Madden, 1998). However, simply transferring the characteristics of interpersonal love into a

marketing context has raised conceptual challenges, because the feelings a person holds for a brand are not perfectly comparable to the feelings a person has for another person (Batra *et al.*, 2012; Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006). One of the main differences is that whereas interpersonal love is an outcome of a bidirectional interaction, love for an object such as an organisation, product or brand is unidirectional (Whang *et al.*, 2004).

Nevertheless, brand love is important to organizations because it is the most emotionally intense connection between the brand and its consumers (Schmid and Huber, 2019). For this reason, although strong organization–consumer relationships are acknowledged to be the main objective of brand management (Esch *et al.*, 2006), brand love is understood as the ultimate goal of these relationships.

From an interpersonal perspective, love is seen as the inclusion of others in the self (Aron and Aron, 1996). Transferring this to the consumer-brand domain of brand love research, which sheds light on the feeling of love towards an object rather than a person, brand love is understood as occurring if characteristic attributes of a brand reflect a consumer’s self (Ahuvia, 2005; Albert *et al.*, 2008). Consumers tend to feel passionate love for a brand if it is able to reflect the consumers’ inner self, for example his or her personality.

Further, both hedonic and utilitarian attributes play a part in brand love formation. Huber *et al.* (2015) found that consumers not only identify with a brand and thus feel love for it if it is an emotionally appealing brand, functional benefits such as the ability of a product to perform a desired function are a central driver of long-term relationships as well (2015: 575). Huber *et al.*’s (2015) study also shows that a passionate love subtly evolves into a more rational love when utilitarian features of a product become more important to a consumer.

Another important finding is that brand love, like interpersonal love, is dynamic in nature (Whang *et al.*, 2004); feelings of love can change over time. Brand love studies show that love is affected by length of relationship. Over time, as brand familiarity increases, the consumer senses a feeling of assimilation towards the brand (Huber *et al.*, 2015).

Relationship marketing studies (e.g., Yim *et al.*, 2008; Bügel *et al.*, 2011) have drawn on Sternberg’s triangular theory of love (1986, 1988) originating in psychological research to explore consumers’ love for brands. According to Sternberg, love consists of three components that together can be considered the vertices of a triangle: intimacy, passion and commitment (**see Figure 1**). Intimacy refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness and bondedness in loving relationships and includes feelings that essentially give rise to the experience of warmth in a loving relationship. Passion refers to the driving force that leads to romance and other related phenomena in loving relationships and therefore is considered the motivational component in loving relationships. Commitment is a cognitive element

(Shimp and Madden, 1998) involved in the decision to love someone and to maintain that love.

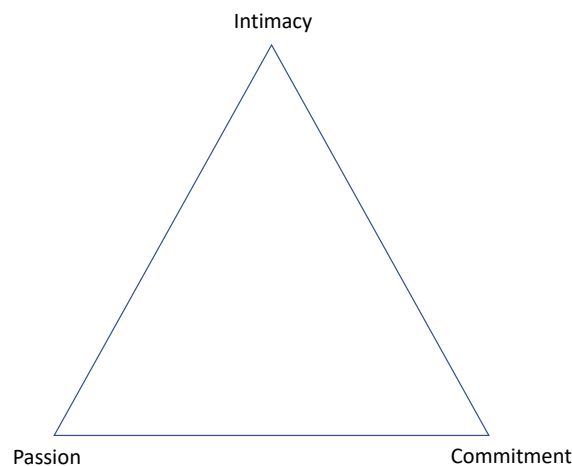


Fig. 1: Sternberg's Triangle of Love. Source: Bügel, et al. (2011).

These three components of love, when combined, may lead to different types of love (Sternberg, 1988). For example, *non-love* is the result of the absence of all three components of love. *Liking* results from the existence of intimacy in the absence of passion and commitment. Passion without the other components of love results in *infatuated love*. *Romantic love* derives from a combination of intimacy and passion with little commitment. *Companionate love* is the result of a combination of intimacy and commitment with little passion. *Consummate or complete love* results from a full combination of all three components.

Bügel et al. (2011) apply Sternberg's theory of love to their study of brand love in organisation-consumer relationships. Like other brand love studies, they measure intimacy by asking test participants to what extent they feel they have a confidential relationship with a particular brand, how much value they attach to the brand, and how much "good understanding" they have of the brand. To measure passion, they ask participants to what extent they are fascinated by the "things" the brand does and how much they feel "very enthusiastic" about the brand. To measure commitment, they ask participants to what extent they intend to remain a customer with the brand, they feel "committed to" the brand, and how often they consider switching to another brand. However, because they were not able to find evidence of the existence of both passion and intimacy as separate constructs, they argued that passion and intimacy can jointly form one construct, which they labelled intimacy. Interestingly, despite the breadth of research on brand love, relationship marketing research has not paid much attention to customer intimacy (the study by Bügel et al., 2011 is an exception).

### ***Relationship Management Research On Intimacy, Passion and Commitment***

Next, a review is conducted of public relations studies with a focus on varying types and levels of intimacy, passion and commitment in organisational relationships with stakeholders. The relationship dimension of commitment has attracted significant attention in relationship management research (Bortree, 2010; Bruning and Ledingham, 1998; Huang, 1998, 2001a; Ki and Hon, 2007, 2009; Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlinson and Lesko, 1997). Commitment is defined as “the extent to which one part believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending time to maintain and promote” (Hon and Grunig, 1999: 20). However, relationship management research has not focused much on intimacy and passion. Ki and Shin (2006) conducted a content analysis of OPR studies published between 1985 and 2001 and found that only two studies focused on intimacy as a measurement variable and only one focused on emotions as a measurement variable.

Within relationship management research, Slabbert and Barker’s (2014) organisation-stakeholder relationship-building model contributes to a normative theory of OSR because of its focus on stakeholder intimacy and organisations’ equal partnership with stakeholders. In their three-phase OSR-building model they propose a phase called ‘OSR development’ in which the organisation seeks to develop its strategic stakeholders as partners of the organisation along a continuum of four types of OSRs. The first type is *foundational OSR*, initiated by the organisation and which OSR antecedents are sought to initiate the relationship. The second type, *mutually beneficial OSR*, is characterized by a high degree of reciprocity, compromise and genuine concern for each entity’s wellbeing. The third type is *sustainable OSR* where, through shared meaning and decision-making to achieve mutually-beneficial objectives, both entities act in the best interest of each other and observe the benefit of cooperatively working towards attaining relational objectives. The final type is *organisation-stakeholder partnership*, a more intimate relational state reached over a long-term process in which mutually desired end goals are achieved through two-way engagement, mutual experience of stewardship, and collaborative problem solving. The final phase in their model is called ‘OSR maintenance’. Here the organisation attempts to nurture OSRs to grow in intensity over time into a mutually beneficial OSR, a sustainable OSR, and ultimately an organisation-stakeholder partnership.

Other fields of public relations research, such as crisis communication (Coombs and Holladay, 2005) and communication engagement (Lievonen, Luoma-aho and Bowden, 2018), have begun more recently to examine emotions in stakeholder relations, which contributes somewhat to an understanding of stakeholder love in public relations research. Indeed, emotion (feelings) is understood as one engagement dimension alongside behaviour (action or interaction) and cognition (thoughts). Emotional engagement refers to stakeholders’ affective investment in organisation/brand



relationships and has been examined as “intrinsic enjoyment” (Calder *et al.*, 2009), “enthusiasm” (Vivek *et al.*, 2012), “affection” (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014), and “passion” (Hollebeek, 2011a). Research on emotions in public relations literature mostly addresses stakeholders’ feelings and emotions, such as love and hate (for negative engagement see Lievonen, Luoma-aho and Bowden, 2018), that are expressed in public spaces and that affect organisational reputation and legitimacy. Stakeholders feeling trust and love for an organisation are described as faith-holders (Luoma-aho, 2015). Macnamara (2018) describes positive affectivity as involving “a deeper level of positive emotional response beyond liking or attraction” (2018: 117).

## **ORGANISATIONS’ LOVE FOR STAKEHOLDERS**

Although public relations studies have investigated stakeholders’ emotions, including related love-components such as intimacy, passion and commitment, toward organisations, very little research has addressed organisations’ emotions toward stakeholders. Accordingly, this chapter integrates brand love theory in relationship marketing research with Sternberg’s theory of love in psychological research to build theory in relationship management research explaining how love for stakeholders can be applied in organisation-stakeholder relationships. Theory explaining organisational love contributes to a better understanding of close relationships in relationship management research specifically and public relations research more broadly.

This chapter challenges two assumptions emanating from two areas of scholarship. First, acknowledging that brand love is unidirectional (Whang *et al.*, 2004), this chapter challenges the implicit assumption in relationship marketing research that organisation-consumer love (i.e., brand love) only emanates from consumers. (See **Figure 2**). Second, it challenges the assumption in public relations research that organisation-stakeholder emotions only emerge from stakeholders. In other words, emotions research in public relations predominantly views emotion flowing in a singular direction (see **Figure 2**). Relationship management research would benefit from a renewed focus on how organisations might initiate and manage intimate relationships with stakeholders based on mutually beneficial, two-way interactions. This chapter argues that a deeper, more intimate relationship between organizations and stakeholders can be gained by pursuing bi-directional organizational love.

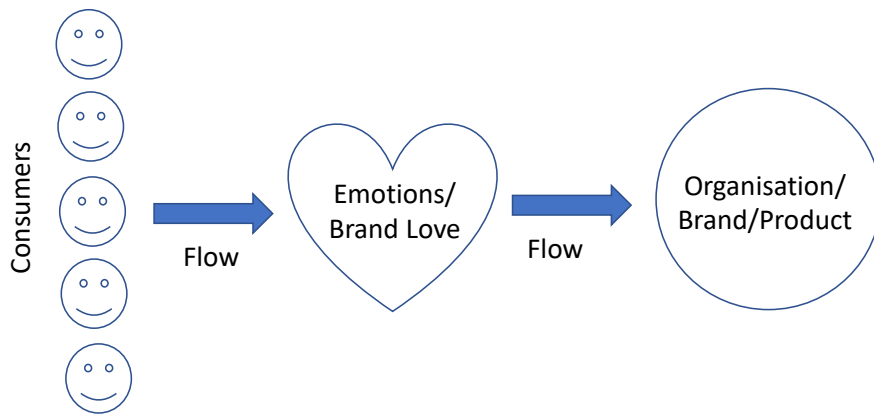


Fig. 2: Emotions (in Public Relations Research) and Brand Love (in Relationship Marketing Research) Tend to Flow in One Direction.

In sum, there appears to be a lack of acknowledgement in both relationship marketing and relationship management research of the possibility for emotional reciprocity in organisation-stakeholder relationships. Current research indicates that the expression of emotions (including love) in relationships is one-sided. The argument is made in this chapter that organisations should not expect stakeholders to display favourable and close affection for an organisation without considering how the organisation might display a similarly favourable response. For this reason, this chapter advocates for reciprocity in the relationship: that is, organisations not only *seeking* stakeholder affection but also *giving* stakeholder affection (see Figure 3). Indeed, this chapter goes a step further by advocating an emphasis on *giving* OSL over *seeking* OSL. Reasons for this are discussed in more detail later.

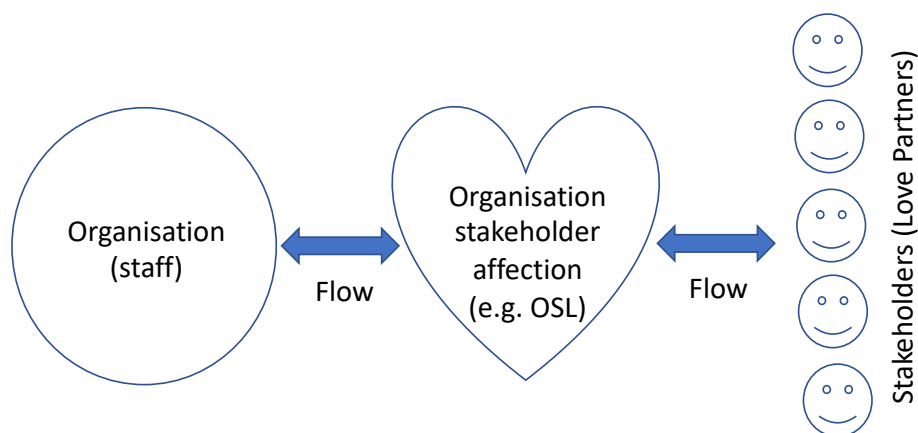


Fig. 3: Reciprocity in Organization-Stakeholder Affection.

This leads to the question: Can an organisation love or at least adopt love-like affection for its stakeholders? However, to answer this, this chapter first deals with a fundamental question in OPR research: How can an organisation have a relationship with a collective mass of individuals (see Heath, 2013; Ki, Kim and Ledingham, 2015)? In other words, can individual relationships be scaled to mass audiences and vice versa? Are OPRs located at the 'individual' level of analysis or are they located at a 'community' level (community relations) or a wider 'public' and 'stakeholder' (public relations) group level?

Public relations scholars, particularly those who emphasize the theoretical importance of individuals in public relations processes (e.g., Hallahan, 2000; Toth, 2000), argue that such relationships can be achieved when the public relations function permeates the entire workforce so that multiple employees across departments throughout an organisation potentially are able to maintain interpersonal relationships (Toth, 2000: 188) with multiple members of the public. Some studies also attempt to address this concern by referring to organisational relationships with stakeholders (OSR) (see Slabbert and Barker, 2014), rather than the broader construct of publics (OPR), and others narrow their focus to organisational relationships with key or strategic publics/stakeholders, arguably easier to conceptualize and manage, rather than all publics/stakeholders. To address this conundrum, Heath (2013) even proposed Organisation(s)–Other(s) Relationship(s) (OsOsRs). To draw attention to an individual level of analysis while avoiding complicated terminology, OSL theory predominantly refers to organisation-stakeholder relationships (OSRs).

Acknowledging that an organisation can have relationships with mass stakeholders, the initial question posed earlier can now be addressed: Can an organisation love or at least adopt love-like affection for its stakeholders? Put another way, can an organisation develop and demonstrate varying levels of love in its relationships with stakeholders? Obviously, an organisation may be considered an inanimate entity and thus cannot have emotions. However, the possibility of a loving organisations exists when they are conceptualized as consisting of people representing the organisation who themselves can initiate and maintain loving relationships with stakeholders. Accordingly, adopting Sternberg's theory of love as a framework for OSL, we can conceptualize staff having varying levels of commitment, intimacy and passion in their relationships with individual or groups of customers, clients, journalists, investors, and so on. Managers might have varying levels of commitment, intimacy and passion in their relationships with individual or groups of investors, employees, regulators, and clients. These levels of love could be identified in Sternberg's types of love and include *liking* (i.e., intimacy without passion and commitment), *companionate love* (i.e., a combination of intimacy and commitment with little passion), or *consummate or complete love* results (i.e., equal levels of intimacy, passion and commitment).

This chapter acknowledges past and current skepticism over whether love for stakeholders can be nurtured within an organisation. Research on brand love acknowledges that organisations can proactively stimulate consumers' love for organisational brands through strategic means such as loyalty programs, personalized emails, and customer experiences with built-in emotional components. Likewise, OPR research acknowledges that organisations can cultivate close relationships. For example, studies have examined relationship nurturing strategies such as access, positivity, sharing tasks, and assurances (Ki and Hon, 2009) and relationship maintenance strategies such as guidance, assurances, and shared tasks (Bortree, 2010). Therefore, this chapter extends theory in relationship marketing and relationship management research to propose how OSL also can be nurtured and managed by organisations. Public relations professionals with responsibility for managing relationships with various stakeholders may extend this responsibility to nurturing and managing OSL. Practical ways that OSL might be implemented within organisations are suggested in the concluding section of this chapter. An example includes incorporating OSL into organisational culture through employee training programs.

Definitions of OPRs from relationship management research and of brand love from relationship marketing research inform the following definition: Organisation-stakeholder love (OSL) is the affective orientation of intimacy and commitment an organisation initiates and nurtures towards internal and external stakeholders for the purpose of giving them the best possible value in the organisation-stakeholder relationship (OSR).

The following are proposed as precepts of OSL:

Stakeholders' feelings towards an organisation are important to the target organisation, but these should not remain the only motive for relationship nurturing; the other motive should be OSL.

Organisations should take responsibility to initiate and cultivate a love for each individual or group of stakeholders, whether they initially feel the same way toward the organisation or not.

Intensity of OSL should be adjusted if a stakeholder expresses that she/he does not want an intimate, committed relationship. Organisations should respect the wishes of the stakeholder; indeed, stakeholders should be able to easily opt out of such a relationship.

The public relations function should be responsible for OSL, given that it manages stakeholder relationships.

Stakeholders should be treated as valued relationship partners (love partners) with the right and means to collaborate in organisational decision-making affecting them.

How can organisations show love for stakeholders? To demonstrate *intimacy* (one of the love components) in the relationship, organisations can attempt to display transparency with stakeholders. This may be done by sharing what stakeholders may perceive to be an organisation's internal confidential information, such as personal information about its employees (e.g., major illnesses, marriages and births), professional information about its employees (e.g., promotions and new qualifications), product information (e.g., product/service glitches being addressed and innovative features being planned), and organisational systems (e.g., data privacy issues being addressed and new organisation-wide software being installed). Some of these could be revealed to stakeholders through 'confidential' media such as password-protected sites or presented via rich media such as a video from the CEO.

Another way to demonstrate *intimacy* in the relationship could involve organisations revealing the above information through personalized communication, such as letters addressed to individual stakeholders by name and signed by the CEO with a tone and text aimed at demonstrating commitment, empathy and appreciation. These letters could offer complimentary gifts and include an invitation to special events with exclusive stakeholder access.

Organisations also can show genuine *commitment* (another love component) to each stakeholder relationship. This is especially important when the relationship is under threat, such as during product recalls and shortages, changes in legislation affecting products and services, and organisational restructures. For example, during the drawn-out Brexit process UK universities could reassure currently-enrolled students from non-UK countries that their student status will not change until their graduation.

## **ORGANISATIONAL LOVE AND ETHICS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS**

Next, this chapter advocates not just reciprocity in the relationship, but a switch in emphasis away from just nurturing stakeholders' feelings, attitudes and behaviours towards organisations (e.g., emotional engagement and brand love) to first nurturing an organisation's love towards stakeholders. In other words, organisations should emphasize *giving* over *receiving* love, which contributes to ethical scholarship in public relations (see Bowen, 2007; Botan, 1997; Fawkes, 2012). Ethics are considered the rules one uses to solve problems when morals and/or values are uncertain (J. Grunig, 2000).

This chapter posits that OSL can serve as a motivation for organisations' ethical treatment of stakeholders. An organisation's orientation or stance towards stakeholders is important because it can be considered a driving force that shapes organisations' relationship with stakeholders (Shin et al., 2005), including how it treats them and communicates with them. Public relations studies have explored organisations' orientations towards stakeholders and the effect this has on organisations' behaviors towards stakeholders. As an example, it has been widely argued that an organisation's 'strategic communication' orientation leads that organisation to treat stakeholders as a means to an end, which is understood as a more one-way asymmetrical communication model. A paradigmatic shift towards a more stakeholder-centric orientation complements a two-way symmetrical communication model that influences how organisations behave towards stakeholders. For example, an organisation's 'engagement' orientation influences its interaction with stakeholders; such an approach "guides the process of interactions among groups" (Taylor and Kent, 2014: 384). Indeed, consumer engagement is described as a motivation (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Baldus, Voorhees and Calantone, 2015). Kent and Taylor (2002, 2014) argue that 'dialogic engagement' is an organisational orientation that contributes to a more ethical approach towards stakeholders; dialogue is considered "more ethical" because it is based on the principles of honesty, trust, and positive regard for the other rather than simply a conception of the public as a means to an end" (Kent and Taylor, 2002: 33).

This chapter's focus on treating stakeholders as 'love partners' contributes to the view that OPR fits into a more participatory communication model in which organisations seek to treat stakeholders as equal partners in the relationship. This complements the idea that collaboration and consensus should be the essence of ethical public relations practice (Spicer, 1997). This view is shared by Heath (2001) who identified with the emerging emphasis in public relations on building relationships, shared control, and collaborative decision-making.

OSL theory responds to the criticism that relationship management research is too focused on an organisation's strategic intent to influence its stakeholders (see Coombs and Holladay, 2015) and that theory explaining and advocating mutuality in relationships, especially in terms of mutual influence, appear more idealistic than practical. From an interpersonal perspective, love is seen as the inclusion of others in the self (Aron and Aron, 1996), which suggests that an organisation adopting a love approach towards its stakeholders should strive for inclusion of stakeholders in the life of the organisation. Maslow's (1962) Being love (B-love), described as a higher form of love, involves being more aware of the self and the other person. This is in contrast to his Deficiency love (D-love) described as a need for longing and possession and little concern for the other person's welfare. Theunissen (2019) argues that, from the perspective of Kantian ethics, employees have a duty of care

to *be* engaged and to develop engaged relationships with organisational stakeholders to ensure that the organisations survive and flourish (2019: 52).

Drawing on dialogue theory in public relations research (Taylor and Kent, 2014), this chapter contends that a love orientation may guide an organisation to recognize its stakeholders' inherent dignity and self-worth and to value sharing and mutual understanding between interactants, even if they are hostile to the organisation. Just as dialogue is characterized by a sense that participants are committed to each other and care about each other (Kent and Taylor, 2002), a love orientation should inspire organisations to be committed to and care about stakeholders. This approach is tied to Taylor and Kent's (2014) ideal of engagement based on a two-way, authentic, relational dialogue that "enables organizations and stakeholders to interact, fostering understanding, goodwill, and a shared view of reality" (2014: 391).

OSL has links with communal relationships (Clark and Mills, 1979). Hung (2005) draws attention to a continuum of six types of relationships between those that are characterized by self-interest (e.g., exploitive relationships) and those focused on the other party's interests (e.g., communal relationships). Communal relationships are relationships in which "both parties provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other—even when they get nothing in return" (Hon and Grunig, 1999: 21). Ethical public relations is linked to the idea of communal relationships in which organisations pay greater attention to their social responsibilities to their stakeholders. Communal relationships are not without benefits to organisations, because by building a reputation for being concerned about stakeholder interests, organisations encounter less opposition from stakeholders and more support over the long term.

## **CONCLUSION**

Following other public relations studies that draw on relationship marketing research (Gesualdi, 2019; Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison and Lesko, 1997), this chapter draws on relationship marketing theory to improve our understanding in public relations research of organisation-stakeholder relationship (OSR) intimacy. This chapter argues that an organisation should manage each OSR with a love orientation (organisational-stakeholder love; OSL) and that each OSR presents the organisation with an opportunity to ensure the stakeholder (love partner) gains maximum value from the relationship. The value of OSL theory is that it may draw attention in public relations research to why and how organisations can gain deeper, more intimate relationships with stakeholders towards mutually beneficial outcomes for both parties.

This chapter's love orientation contributes to development of theory on ethical public relations. A love orientation places emphasis on why organisations should build relationships with stakeholders. Rather

than simply viewing positive emotions (including love) as a desired outcome of stakeholder relationships (e.g., brand love) or viewing a love orientation as a strategic resource to woo stakeholders towards deeper relationships, this chapter advocates the view that OSL can guide organisations to engage ethically with stakeholders.

This chapter acknowledges that some stakeholders will not value intimate or even long-term relationships. Nevertheless, an organisation's love orientation towards stakeholders should address this concern; an orientation towards valuing the needs of the other party should also take into account the other party's wish to not be involved in a relationship.

### ***Practical Implications***

Public relations professionals should adopt a love orientation to redirect a focus back on the original relationship-building purpose of public relations and by extension on the reason why the organisation should value stakeholders, even those that are antagonistic. Although the application of a love orientation primarily should be the responsibility of the public relations function, it must be integrated into all organisational functions, particularly those that interact most with external and internal stakeholder groups, such as sales (with B2C customers and B2B clients), marketing (with B2C customers and B2B clients), business development (with clients and suppliers), finance (with customers, suppliers and regulators), public relations (with news media, investors, activists, and employees), and human resources (with employees). Accordingly, the public relations function should take responsibility for ensuring organisation-stakeholder love (OSL) is reflected in and guides all organisation-wide interaction with stakeholders. It should build it into the culture of the organisation. Organisations such as government departments and agencies, corporations, and non-profit organizations should adopt a love orientation that enables the organisation to achieve OSL with individuals as well as small and large groups of stakeholders. To become institutionalized in the organisation, the public relations manager must be viewed as the chief architect embedding OSL in policy, cultural, structural, human resource, systems, and technological dimensions.

This chapter contends that intimate OSRs require an architecture of OSL managed by the public relations manager as the chief OSL architect orchestrating five inter-linked elements:

- i. An organisational culture embracing OSL;
- ii. Policies advocating and integrating OSL within the life of the organisation;
- iii. Structures, technologies and processes enabling OSL formation, maintenance and communication;



- iv. Employee training for OSL; and
- v. Ongoing OSL communication with external stakeholders, management and all employees.

### ***Future OSL-related Research***

From an academic viewpoint, this chapter readily acknowledges that a love orientation requires much further theoretical discussion and empirical investigation. Besides its contribution to ethical public relations scholarship, other areas of public relations research that may draw on a love orientation include social capital (e.g., a love orientation can contribute over time to the build-up of social capital), and CSR communication (see Shaw, 2006, for CSR research on love as a motivator for an organisation's behaviour towards its stakeholders). Surprisingly, CSR communication literature has emphasized organisational communication *to* stakeholders over communication *with* them (Crane and Glozer, 2016: 1230). Given OSL theory's affiliation with a more participatory communication model, it would be interesting to examine stakeholders' responsiveness to OSL in a CSR communication context. Also given the proposition here that OSL guides organisational behaviour, this could be tested in future studies examining organisational CSR behaviours.

Measurement of OSL may be adapted from brand love research. For example, love for external stakeholders may be analysed through a survey of organisational representatives asking questions related to their level of commitment (high to low) to particular stakeholder relationships and their level of intimacy (high to low) in those relationships. Like Bügel et al. (2011), this chapter recommends combining passion and intimacy into the one construct labelled as intimacy.

Future public relations studies could compare levels of OSL in different sectors. For example, intimacy in relationships may be more readily identified in organisations operating in certain markets. Brand love research has found that stronger feelings of customer intimacy exist in rather personalized and high-touch service sectors such as hair dressers and restaurants (Yim et al., 2008) and may not be as present in more mass-market oriented sectors such as banking and telecom (Battacharya and Bolton, 1999; Dowling, 2002).

Acknowledging that OSL is dynamic in nature, that intensity levels and types of love may increase or decrease over time, it would be interesting to investigate how OSL changes over time. Studies could also attempt to shed light on progression and regression of OSR through phases, and how OSL may contribute to this OSR progression and regression.

Given that an organisation's good gestures are mirrored by publics' recommitment to the relationship (Xu, 2019: 12), future studies could test how OSL may be reciprocated by stakeholders. While much of the relationship management literature has focused on relationship cultivation strategies and the

outcomes and quality of these relationships, relationship antecedents (Bortree, 2010; Kim, 2007) has not received the same level of attention. In other words, we still do not know much about the reasons why publics enter into relationships with organisations. Accordingly, research examining OSL may discover why and how stakeholders demonstrate affection for an organisation based on reciprocal love.

Crisis communication research has overlooked stakeholder relationships (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, and Hocke, 2010; Coombs, 2000; Liu and Fraustino, 2014). Accordingly, crisis communication studies could explore how OSL might build up social capital or goodwill and thereby contribute to mitigating the effects of organisational crises. Thus, one hypothesis could be that longer-term adoption of a love orientation may help organisations prevent and contain a crisis or mitigate its effects. In other words, when OSL is implemented and expressed over time, stakeholders may respond accordingly during an organisational crisis. Xu (2019) found that “reciprocation has not been adequately studied in crisis communication” despite findings showing that “reciprocation can indeed manifest in crises” (2019: 12).

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