HOW AND TO WHAT EXTENT DO DOMINANT COALITION MEMBERS' VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS IMPACT PUBLIC RELATIONS PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZATIONAL STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Capstone

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Abstract

This research paper examines how and to what extent the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members influence whether they invite – or not – public affairs practitioners to participate in the highest levels of decision making.

The study draws on upper echelons theory, which argues that top executives' characteristics and backgrounds shape organizational outcomes, and on research that suggests values of openness to the environment and autonomy may be predictors of how dominant coalition members perceive public relations participation in organizational decision making. Data were collected through a cross-Canada survey administered to a non-random sample of 102 dominant coalition members and 10 in-depth interviews. The population represented here includes members of non-profit, private and government organizations. Results suggest that dominant coalition members' values of openness to the environment and autonomy are positively associated with public relations having a seat at the organizational decision-making table. Perceptions of public relations practitioners to act as strategists is a more significant predictor. Most previous research in this area includes little to no Canadian participation and focuses on the skills and strategic abilities practitioners need to be elevated without significantly exploring if developing those skills and abilities matter to dominant coalition members. This research paper contributes to filling that gap by collecting data from Canadian participants and further exploring how dominant coalition members make decisions that affect how public relations is practised at their organizations.

Keywords: Dominant coalition, environmental openness, autonomy, upper echelons, communication management, organizational strategic management

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Introduction

As the practice of public relations evolves, scholars and practitioners are increasingly calling for communicators to be direct contributors to organizational strategic management (Kennedy et al., 2017; Arthur W. Page Society, 2007; Bowen, 2006, Dozier & L. A. Grunig, 1992). This is accomplished by having communicators as members of the C-suite, if the organization employs a Chief Communications Officer (CCO), or through regular access to the organization's senior decision makers, known as the dominant coalition. Yet, a survey of senior communicators in Canada, the United States and four other countries conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic found that fewer than 40 per cent of respondents play an active role in organizational strategic planning and only 13 per cent reported playing "a key role in defining overall business strategy" (GAP VIII, 2014, p. 21).

Berger (2007) suggests that knowing how to attain more decision-making power and professional legitimacy are central issues in public relations that continue to be "frustratingly elusive'' (p. 229). Most attempts to understand why more communicators are not part of the dominant coalition have focused on practitioners. The Excellence Study, which interviewed CEOs and heads of public relations, suggested that most public relations professionals did not participate fully in strategic management because of lack of knowledge and the tools to do so (Grunig, 2006). However, developing strong strategic abilities does not guarantee participation in the dominant coalition (Carneiro, 2021). This is the flip side of the issue of what it takes for communicators to join the dominant coalition. It raises the question, how and to what extent do the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members make them more likely — or less likely — to invite communicators to organizational strategic management? Wilson (2016) surveyed 118 dominant coalition members of for-profit, government, and non-profit

organizations in the United States. He explored two values that may be predictors of whether communicators will participate in organizational strategic management. The first is dominant coalition members' value of openness to the environment, which Wilson describes as requiring information from the environment to adapt to changing conditions. The second is value of organizational autonomy, described as the ability to pursue goals unopposed. Finally, Wilson drew on upper echelons theory, which suggests that dominant coalition members' perceptions influence their choices (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), including of who is invited to participate in the highest levels of strategic management.

Literature review

Dominant Coalition

Organizations do what they do because their most powerful people decide to do it that way (L.A. Grunig, 1992). This succinct description quickly sets the stage for how organizational decision making happens – there is a group at the top and individuals are either at the table as part of that group or they do not set the organization's strategy. The C-suite, headed by the CEO, is usually seen as that most powerful decision-making group, but there may be others with informal power who contribute to strategy setting (Mintzberg, 1983). Those individuals can be found at different levels of the organizational hierarchy and in some cases are external to the organization. Those at lower levels or external to the organization participate in strategy setting via the influence they have over the people with formal decision-making power. Organ (1971) lists expertise, friendship and even ingratiation as means of influence. Kanter (1977) describes influencers as individuals who have the ability to use their informal power "to mobilize people and resources to get things done" (p. 166). Together, these elite strategists are known as the dominant coalition (Grunig, 2006).

The concept of a dominant coalition was introduced by Cyert and March (1963), who theorized that organizations have a group of individuals who not only set organizational goals, but their values also shape how the organization operates. Hague (1980) argues this is a group effort by necessity. While some positions may be seen as the final decision maker, such as that of CEO, the size and complexity of organizations and their environment have made it too difficult for one individual to control alone. Therefore, specialized teams and joint decision making are necessary. Stevenson et al. (1985) characterized the coalition this way:

> an interacting group of individuals, deliberately constructed, independent of the formal structure, lacking its own internal formal structure, consisting of mutually perceived membership, issue oriented, focused on a goal or goals external to the coalition, and requiring concerted member action. (p. 251)

Understanding the factors that are important to these top executives matters because those factors influence their strategic choices, which is a term used here to include choices made formally and informally (Child, 1972). Hambrick and Mason (1984) ground this argument on upper echelons theory, which states that strategic choices are "partially predicted by managerial background characteristics" (p. 1). Strategic choices also include the decision of who gets to have a seat at the dominant coalition table.

Public relations, which is sometimes referred to as public affairs or communications, may or may not be part of the dominant coalition. Public relations scholars argue that participation first, benefits the organization by increasing profit and enhancing organizational legitimacy (Kennedy et al., 2017) and second, benefits greater society by contributing to informed debate, developing mutual understanding and using collaboration to work for societal good (Grunig, 2000). The idea of having communicators as part of the group setting organizational strategy

goes back to at least the 1920s when Arthur W. Page negotiated a seat at the decision-making table at AT&T (Block, n/d), becoming the first vice-president of public relations at a major American corporation. In 1983, senior communicators at AT&T launched a professional association for senior public relations and corporate communications executives. They named it after their pioneering predecessor and today the Arthur W. Page Society attracts chief communications officers (CCOs) of Fortune 500 corporations and CEOs of influential public relations agencies. These senior executives have expressed their support for public relations as a function of executive management, saying they view it as central to the success of the organization (Arthur W. Page Society, 2007, p. 2). This view is backed by research that suggests when public relations is part of the dominant coalition, practitioners help solve problems and help the organization become more socially responsible (Broom & Dozier, 1986), which strengthens its social licence to operate.

Yet, a survey of senior communicators in Canada, the United States and four other countries found that fewer than 40 per cent of respondents play an active role in organizational strategic planning and only 13 per cent reported playing "a key role in defining overall business strategy" (GAP VIII, 2014, p. 21). To Edelman (2011) that is a missed opportunity. He argues that given the complex environment faced by organizations, public relations can guide business better than any other discipline (p. 3), but that happens only when public relations managers operate within the dominant coalition.

Public Relations Participation in the Dominant Coalition

In 1985, the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) funded research into how, why and to what extent communication contributes to the achievement of

organizational objectives. The result, the Excellence Study, is now considered seminal research into the practice of public relations (Toth, 2009). Led by James E. Grunig, researchers conducted in-depth interviews with the CEOs whose organizations were determined to have the most-excellent public relations function. Most of those CEOs said they valued the communications function for being able to bring in external voices to the strategic management process, which was accomplished by communicators scanning the social, political, and institutional environment of the organization (Grunig, 2006). However, public relations is more often than not left out of the dominant coalition when a broader swath of organizations is considered (L. A. Grunig, 1992).

Most attempts to understand why more communicators are not part of the dominant coalition have focused on the practitioners themselves. The CEOs and heads of public relations interviewed as part of the Excellence Study suggested that when public relations professionals did not participate in strategic management it was because of their lack of knowledge and the tools to do so (Grunig, 2006). The Corporate Communication Institute's Corporate Communication Practices and Trends 2005 Study (Goodman, 2006) lists 23 skills that form a "skillset necessary for success as a corporate communicator in a global business environment" (p. 8). Numerous industry articles point to the specific skills and abilities that public relations managers need to merit participation in strategic decision making. They include the education needed to practice (DiStaso et al., 2009), understanding business operations (Yeatman, 2012), issues management (J. E. Grunig & L. A. Grunig, 1998), environmental scanning (Siler, 2012), critical thinking (McCleneghan, 2006) leadership skills (Berger, 2013), ability to drive change within the organization (Goldberg, 2012), ability to demonstrate the value of public relations to the organization (DeSanto, 2011), and internal relationship building (Haiken, 2013).

However, developing strong strategic abilities and skills does not guarantee participation in the dominant coalition (Carneiro, 2021). For example, the CEOs of two Southern Ontario organizations that employ communicators in junior roles said they value different priorities and therefore have no intention of hiring senior communicators or of elevating existing roles. Practitioners working in these organizations looking to one day have a seat at the dominant coalition table will have to leave and go work somewhere else. To borrow a phrase from the world of personal relationships, the message from the two CEOs to communicators is clear, "it's not you, it's me." This is the flip side of the issue of what it takes for communicators to join the dominant coalition. It raises the question, how and to what extent do the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members make them more likely — or less likely — to invite communicators to organizational strategic management? This issue was explored in the United States by Wilson (2016). He surveyed 201 dominant coalition members, resulting in 118 usable questionnaires from top leaders of for-profit, government, and non-profit organizations in that country. He found two values that are positively related to dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making. The first is dominant coalition members' value of openness to the environment, which Wilson describes as requiring information from the environment to adapt to changing conditions. The second is organizational autonomy, described as the ability to pursue mission and goals with as little opposition as possible. Finally, together, the values and experiences of dominant coalition members act as a screen between the actual environment and their perceptions of that environment (Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Therefore, dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations practitioners impacts whether they welcome communicators to organizational strategic management. Comparable, in-depth research into the values and perceptions of

dominant coalition members working in Canada is scarce to non-existent, which suggests there is need to better understand the impact of senior managers into the practice of public relations in this country.

Dominant Coalition Value of Organizational Openness to the Environment

Public relations research has found a connection between environmental complexity and the needs of organizations (Wilson, 2016). Organizations that operate under continually changing conditions require ongoing information from their environments so they can adapt. This can include changing public attitudes, shifting financial conditions, new governments and even global issues that impact supply chains. Kelly (1998) argues those organizations don't really have a choice, they must be open to their environment because they are dependent on it for success and survival. This has the potential to impact public relations participation in organizational decision making since communicators are well positioned to monitor the organization's environment. Dozer and L. A. Grunig (1992) found that organizations that are open to their environment — described as operating as open systems — devote relatively high levels of resources to units that help the organization adapt to its environment (p. 397), such as public relations. Moreover, because their managerial subsystem needs this information, organizational managers value the adaptive units more and seek information from them. That's because strategic decision making must take into account an organization's various internal and external stakeholders, as well as the issues, trends, and ethical considerations that are related to that organization. For example, in response to stakeholder concerns for animal rights, Mattel stopped making Sea World Trainer Barbie (Popken, 2015) and Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus shut down and reopened without live animals in its shows (Andrew, 2022). Drugmaker Eli Lilly capped the cost of insulin at $35 a month as a direct response to social

media outrage over what the company was charging for the drug, which is used to control blood sugar in people who have diabetes (Lovelace Jr., 2023).

Steyn (2004) notes that the need for information is likely to elevate the role of public relations when the organization's environment "is a key concept in the strategic management process" (p. 171). In addition, the extent to which the organization will need to be responsive depends on the complexity and uncertainty of the environment (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Okura et al., 2008). The more uncertain and complex, the more opportunities is thought to exist for communicators to play a potential role in guiding the organization as it seeks to adapt and adjust to the changing environmental conditions. However, Dozier (1992) argued this is more likely in organizations where the dominant coalition values openness to the environment (p. 344). To return to the succinct description of how organizations operate provided by L. A. Grunig (1992), this is dependent on an organizations' most powerful people and on what they value. Grunig and Grunig (1992) found that the preferences of dominant coalition members have more influence over the type of public relations practiced than any other factor.

When organizational leaders do not believe they need external information, they operate as a closed system (Dozier & L. A. Grunig, 1992). In this scenario, the organization does not devote many resources to units that would help it adapt to its environment, such as public relations. Examples include shipping companies and automotive parts makers. Lauzen and Dozier (1994) suggested that organizations that are closed to the environment see public relations as a function that packages and implements communications only. In this scenario, communicators are tasked with justifying decisions already made by the dominant coalition or with positioning the organization as environmentally responsive when they are not.

Although existing international research suggests that dominant coalition members are more likely to invite communicators to have a seat at the dominant coalition table when openness to the environment is a value, this has not been explored enough among organizations in Canada.

Dominant Coalition Value of Organizational Autonomy

A second value that has the potential to impact public relations participation in the highest levels of decision making is organizational autonomy (Wilson, 2016). Dozier and L. A. Grunig (1992) defined organizational autonomy as being "able to pursue organizational goals and objectives unfettered by their environments (p. 397)." The challenge with this description is that total autonomy does not exist. Therefore, the definition proposed by Stainton (1994) is used in this research. It describes organizational autonomy as "the organization's freedom from both internal and external constraints to formulate and pursue self-determined plans and purposes" (p. 22). This definition of organizational autonomy allows for potential constraints that are internal to the organization, external or both. This study also uses a two-dimensional structure of autonomy as different disciplines focus on substantive or procedural autonomy. "Substantive autonomy" is an organization's power to choose what it will do, such as its mission, goals, objectives and priorities while "procedural autonomy" is the power to determine how it will pursue its mission, goals, objectives and implement its policies and priorities.

Dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy are likely influenced by their perceptions of environmental uncertainty (Wilson, 2016). In unstable environments, there may be a perception of having to constantly anticipate responding to changing conditions. This can include pressure from external activist groups, government regulations, employee demands, customers' expectations and more, all of which can sap human

and financial resources. Grunig and Grunig (1998) found that CEOs valued public relations more when the organization had to engage in symmetrical negotiations or deal with activist groups.

As noted earlier, no organization can achieve full autonomy – all are interdependent on various publics, from employees to consumers and government among others, but organizations can enhance or reduce their autonomy depending on how they interact and cooperate with those publics. Arthur W. Page, the former vice-president of public relations at AT&T, raised this issue in 1939 during at a public relations conference in the United States. Page said that, "all business begins with the public permission and exists by public approval" (Burson, 1991).

Grunig (2006) explains that working in the public interest to gain more freedom can be achieved when the public relations function helps manage that interdependence. The Excellence Theory proposes this is accomplished by having public relations establish and cultivate mutually beneficial organizational-public relationships (OPR). Since the publication of the Excellence Theory findings, organizational autonomy has become a key concept in public relations research (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003/1978) and tied to relationship cultivation (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

Wilson and Knighton (2021) suggest that relationship management is highly strategic when it comes to the pursuit of greater autonomy and those choices impact how organizations see the value of public relations. To return to the idea of organizations operating as open or closed systems, some organizations value a heavily regulated operational environment. One example are insurance companies, which tend to operate as closed systems. Following rules and meeting regulation requirements creates a stable and profitable operational environment. On the other hand, organizations that pursue autonomy are more likely to operate as open systems and they do that out of need (Dozier & L. A. Grunig, 1992). They practice symmetrical

communications in an attempt to control their environments, which would call on the public relations function to help manage relationships with stakeholders. The Excellence Study found that this is best accomplished when public relations is part of the dominant coalition. However, it ultimately falls to the powerful senior managers in the dominant coalition to decide whether they perceive public relations practitioners as being able to perform as strategists who can assist the organization manage uncertain environments and establish sufficient autonomy to pursue its mission and goals.

**Dominant Coalition Perceptions of PR to Act as Strategists**

"Top executives matter," according to upper echelons theory, which was introduced in 1984 by Hambrick and Mason. It proposes that organizational decisions are influenced by the background of dominant coalition members, arguing that the education, personal and professional experience, cognitive ability and the values of top managers all help shape strategy and the decision-making process, including the selection of peers at the decision-making table. The theory is built on the premise of "bounded rationality" (Hambrick, 2007), which refers to the limitations humans have in "accessing, processing, and using information" (Holmes et al., 2011).

Upper echelons theory follows a study at the Carnegie School that argues dominant coalition members make complex decisions through behavioural factors rather than a systematic process (Cyert & March, 1963). First, as senior managers, dominant coalition members often work at a hectic and unrelenting pace on a wide array of tasks; their activity is characterized by brevity, fragmentation, and interruption (Mintzberg, 1973). Second, senior managers are regularly asked to make decisions in the face of multiple and competing goals, numerous options and varying aspiration levels. The Carnegie researchers suggest there isn't a suitable systematic process these members of the dominant coalition can use to arrive at a decision. The "facts" they

usually have at hand are "typically ambiguous, contradictory, and far-flung, and they emanate from various parties who have their own motives" (Finkelstein, et al., 2009). Psychologist Walter Mischel (1977) argues that senior decision makers working in ambiguous and complex environments are forced to interpret situations using their "web of personal qualities" and previous experiences as opposed to relying on knowledge to arrive at decisions, which suggests these personal factors do play a role in organizational outcomes.

Figure 1. Upper Echelons Model.
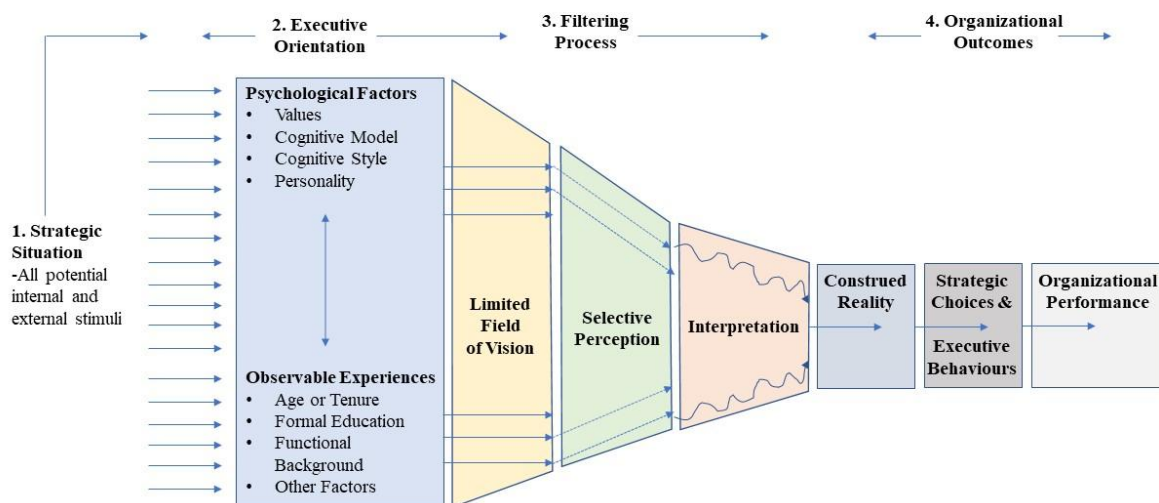
Note. Recreated from Hambrick, D. & Mason, P. (1984). Upper Echelons: The organization as a reflection of its top managers. *The Academy of Management Review*, 9(2), 193-206.

Hambrick and Mason (1984) developed a model to show human limits on strategic choices (see Figure 1), as proposed by upper echelons theory. Unlike many models of strategic behaviour that include only three elements – situation, choice and performance – this expanded

model adds human factors to the decision-making process. It flows from left with "strategic situation" as the first of four stages. The strategic situation is the issue at hand. It can be any internal issue such as financial resources or employee morale or it can be external such as technological, demographic and competitive factors. The second stage is "executive orientation," which adds the "givens" that each decision maker brings with them to administrative situations (March & Simon, 1958). These are a mix of the values they have developed over time and of their experiences. Wang, Holmes Jr., Oh, and Zhu (2015) suggest that in addition to experiences, personality should be included since it is a "relatively permanent, ingrained disposition." Personality has a direct impact on how CEOs collect and process information about the environment, their organization, and their own capabilities. These factors go on to influence the next stage of the decision-making course, which is the filtering process. In this third stage, the senior manager's orientations first affect their field of vision, dictating where they will place their attention, followed by their selective perception, which is what they end up seeing and hearing and, finally, their interpretation of what they saw and heard. This goes on to form the "construed reality" (Sutton, 1987) that senior managers use to make decisions in the fourth stage. The decision maker takes that construed reality and combines it with their values and perceptions to arrive at a strategic choice. That decision then directly impacts organizational performance (Hambrick & Mason, 1984), which is the last stage of the model.

In the context of who dominant coalition members choose as their peers, past experiences with public relations practitioners matter according to upper echelons theory because each interaction contributes to shaping the perceptions that dominant coalition members will carry with them. Hazleton (2006) justifies research into this area by showing there is a gap in how dominant coalition members in the C-suite view the competence of public relations practitioners

and how the practitioners view themselves. The dominant coalition members studied underestimated both technician and manager skills by about 25 per cent. This adds context to why some senior managers interviewed for the Excellence Study indicated they didn't think that public relations practitioners at their organizations could act as strategists (Grunig, 2006). To build upon these findings, the current Canadian study continues the exploration of dominant coalition members' values and perceptions and the role they play in inviting public relations practitioners to the organizational strategic management table.

Research problem

Dominant coalition members choose who they want as their peers. As such, they are the gatekeepers to a seat at the strategic decision-making table for their organizations. The reasons they choose to invite – or not invite – public relations practitioners to join strategic decision making at the organizational level are not well understood and insufficiently explored. While Wilson (2016) shed light on this issue in the United States by studying how the values and perceptions of dominant coalition members in that country impact their perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making, studies involving Canadian participants are scarce to non-existent.

This is important to understand as fewer than 40 per cent of senior communicators in a recent survey that included Canadian participants reported playing an active role in organizational strategic planning and only 13 per cent reported playing "a key role in defining overall business strategy" (GAP VIII, 2014, p. 21).This is despite several studies showing that public relations inclusion in the dominant coalition is beneficial for the organization (Kennedy et al., 2017; Bowen 2006; Grunig, 2000; Broom & Dozier, 1986).

To better understand dominant coalition members in Canada in the context of public relations participation in the highest levels of organizational strategic management, this study first explores the issue through a literature review of related public relations research and industry articles. Second, through the results from a questionnaire completed by dominant coalition members in Canada. Third, by interviewing 10 dominant coalition members. Their thoughts and insights provide qualitative context to the quantitative data produced via the survey.

Research questions

The three research questions below were informed by the literature review and adapted from Wilson's 2016 U.S. study; *How dominant coalition members' values and perceptions impact their perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making.*

RQ1: How and to what extent do dominant coalition members' value of organizational openness to the organization's environment impact how they perceive public relations practitioners as participants in organizational strategic management?

This question explores the relationship between dominant coalition members in organizations that depend on information from the environment to adapt to changing conditions and public relations participation in strategic organizational management.

RQ2: How and to what extent do dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy impact how they perceive public relations practitioners as participants in organizational strategic management?

This question explores the relationship between dominant coalition members in organizations that need to pursue goals unopposed and public relations participation in strategic decision making at the organizational level.

RQ3: How and to what extent do dominant coalition members' perceptions of the potential of public relations practitioners to act as strategists impact their perceptions of communicators taking part in organizational strategic management?

This question determines if dominant coalition members' perception of public relations practitioners being capable of strategic management is positively associated with public relations participation in strategic decision making at the organizational level.

Methodology

Overview of Methods Used

This study utilized formal research methods to systematically gather three sets of data for both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The first resulting dataset is the literature review, which was used to identify existing research into members of the dominant coalition. Particularly, studies that focus on how members of the dominant coalition make decisions, as well as studies that examine the relationship between those senior managers and public relations practitioners were used to create a research benchmark for what is already known or hypothesized. The researcher also noted if studies were conducted in Canada or if they involved Canadian participants. This information was used to inform the development of the two other data collection methods.

The second dataset came from a cross-sectional survey administered to members of the dominant coalition. It was designed based on information from the literature review, principally research conducted in the United States by Wilson (2014, 2016; Wilson & Knight, 2021). The survey was anonymous and contained 15 questions, structured into six sections, as did the survey administered by Wilson (2016). The first two sections were used to obtain participant consent and to determine eligibility — that is, to ensure respondents were senior decision makers in the dominant coalition. The next two survey sections asked questions about how respondents' value openness to the environment and autonomy. The fifth section asked about their perceptions of public relations practitioners as managers and as contributors to organizational strategic management. Answers used interval measurement in the form of five-point Likert-type scales. The sixth and final section of the survey asked for demographic information.

The third and final dataset came from 10 in-depth interviews the researcher conducted with members of the dominant coalition online using Zoom Video Communications or Microsoft Teams. Seventeen questions were written based on the literature review and the same set of questions were asked of all interviewees. They aimed to provide a greater understanding of how, when, where, why and for what reasons dominant coalition members engage with public relations practitioners. The process captured in-depth description and understanding (Stacks, 2017) of the values and perceptions of the 10 dominant coalition members interviewed.

Later, in the data analysis, the results of the literature review, quantitative survey and qualitative interviews were triangulated and evaluated for pattern similarities — or differences. These were then synthesized to answer the research questions.

Data Collection

Nonprobability sampling was used for both the survey and interviews, as drawing a random sample of the population was not possible. More specifically, the study utilized purposive sampling to target members of dominant coalitions across Canada in for-profit businesses, government agencies and non-profit organizations that employ at least one full-time public relations practitioner.

As access to members of the dominant coalition is difficult, the invitations to complete the survey asked that recipients share it with other senior managers, which added snowball sampling as a method of enlisting survey participants. In practice, the researcher initially created a list of senior managers in Canada based on LinkedIn contacts (most are in Ontario and British Columbia where the researcher has lived and worked) and online searches for publicly available email contact information. The list included individuals with titles of Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Administrative Officer (CAO), President, Vice-President, Associate Vice-President, Executive Director and some Directors were also on the list if they were on the top two layers of management or reported directly to the CEO, CAO or President. As the survey was shared with senior academic leaders at various Canadian universities, individuals with the titles of Provost, Dean and Vice-Provost were on the list – all describe senior roles usually involved in organizational strategic management. The researcher posted the link to the survey and information letter on LinkedIn twice (March and May 2023), Twitter twice (March and May 2023) and it was shared with individuals on the email list of the Master of Communications Management program at McMaster University (March 2023). The researcher also utilized LinkedIn Premium — trial subscription (March 2023) and one-month paid subscription (April 2023) — to send invitations to complete the survey to dominant coalition members. In all, the

maximum 10 invitations were sent using each the trial and paid subscriptions. It should be noted that in instances where public relations practitioners were in senior positions, such as Chief Communications Officer or in a director role reporting directly to the CEO, CAO or President, they were considered as being part of the dominant coalition and therefore received an invitation to complete the survey. To make the survey representative of dominant coalition members from across Canada, participants from each province and territory were targeted. As well, the researcher was intentional in efforts to include racialized and Indigenous members of the dominant coalition when sending the survey invitations. The survey was open between Jan. 10, 2023 and May 20, 2023, although the researcher did not start actively enlisting participants until March 10, 2023.

Prior to inviting participants to the in-depth interviews, the questions were reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. Potential interview participants were selected to achieve representation from diverse fields and from across Canada. Email invitations were sent between December 2022 and January 2023 until 10 interviews were scheduled. These were completed on March 6, 2023. They were recorded and later transcribed with participants' consent.

Survey Participants

The online survey captured 102 full responses, which make up the sample used in this study (n=102). There were also 52 incomplete responses for a total of 154 participants. Anecdotally, some individuals with titles such as vice-president and associate vice-president contacted the researcher directly to say they receive the invitation to complete the survey, but declined to participate because they felt they were not "senior decision makers" at their organizations. The 102 respondents who completed the questionnaire all identified themselves as

senior decision makers at their organizations and they include 54 members of the C-suite (52.94

per cent), 23 directors (22.55 per cent), four members of the Board of Directors (3.92 per cent)

and one no answer. Twenty individuals chose Other (19.61 per cent) and listed their positions as:

- Associate Director
- Senior Manager
- Management Staff
- AVP
- Senior Manager
- C-1
- Manager
- Assistant Vice President
- academic leader
- One level down from c-suite
- Vice President Marketing & Communications
- VP
- PC
- Decanal Position
- Senior Manager
- Dean
- Senior Advisor
- Senior manager reporting directly to the CFO.
- Dean

Of the respondents, 35 (34.31 per cent) work in education, 25 (24.51 per cent) in non-

profits, 23 (22.55 per cent) in the private sector, seven (6.86 per cent) in health care, another

seven in government (6.86 per cent) and two (1.96 per cent) in consulting agencies. Three (2.94

per cent) respondents chose "No Answer" to this question. Thirty-six of the respondents

represent organizations with 2-5 communicators (35.29 per cent), 17 organizations with 21-50

communicators (16.67 per cent), 16 organizations with more than 50 communicators (15.69 per

cent), 11 organizations with 11-20 communicators (10.78 per cent), seven organizations with 6-

10 communicators (6.86 per cent), another seven with one communicator (6.86 per cent) and five

responded, "I'm not sure" (4.9 per cent). Three respondents chose, "No Answer." There were 59

women (57.84 per cent) respondents, 40 men (39.22 per cent) and one non-binary individual (0.98 per cent). Two respondents chose "No Answer." Thirty-nine of the respondents (38.24 per cent) identified as having been in their current position more than five years, 18 (17.65 per cent) have been in their positions less than one year, 12 (11.76 per cent) responded 2-3 years, another 12 (11.76 per cent) responded 3-4 years, 11 responded 1-2 years and nine responded 4-5 years. One respondent chose "No Answer."

Interview Participants

The 10 interviews were with dominant coalition members from Ontario and Quebec representing non-profit agencies (2), government (3), public institutions (3) and the private sector (2). Of the interviewees, five are the senior-most decision makers in their organizations – three CEOs, one President and one Executive Director. Six of the participants are women, four are men.

Data Analysis

In the literature review, relevant sources were identified and information from both formal research and industry articles was selected for critical evaluation, interpretation and for reference in the current study.

The survey produced quantitative data. Results of the screening and demographic questions were calculated as a percentage of total respondents. In questions that utilized Likert-type scales, the mean and standard deviation of the responses to each item were calculated to represent the average response (mean) and how widely responses were spread out (standard deviation). This allowed for comparisons between related items and to understand the level of agreement between respondents.

The in-depth interviews produced qualitative data. The transcript of each interview was reviewed to identify themes, patterns, and insights, which were then anonymized and categorized into groups. Categories included, value of organizational openness, value of organizational autonomy and perceptions of public relations participation in organizational decision making.

Finally, the three sets of data were triangulated by comparing the findings of each to show support, disagreement or additional context.

Results

RQ1: How and to what extent do dominant coalition members' value of organizational openness to the organization's environment impact how they perceive public relations practitioners as participants in organizational strategic management?

To measure dominant coalition members' value of organizational openness to the environment, the questionnaire used the 10 statements developed by Wilson (2016). They are based on work by Mink et al., (1994), who created an external responsiveness scale as part of their open organizational model. Wilson modified the original scale items to reflect organizational values, as opposed to behaviours. Respondents to the questionnaire were asked to indicate the extent to which they thought each statement applies to their organization. The mean and standard deviation were calculated for each set of responses to allow for comparisons and to better understand the results as a whole. See Table I.

	Items	M	SD
	Values of organizational openness scale	**4.20**	**0.59**
	Innovating and experimenting to cope with changes in the organization's operating environment	4.46	0.63
	Appointing task forces (or other such work groups) to help the organization understand new situations or problems	3.89	0.53
	Modifying organizational structures, policies, and procedures in response to changes inside and outside the organization	4.22	0.59
	Demonstrating responsibility for the organization's impact on its stakeholders	4.33	0.61
	Responding swiftly to organizational opportunities	4.16	0.58
	Regularly and systematically seeking new information to improve the organization's products and services	4.22	0.59
	Providing enough energy and resources to support the organization's commitment to a new way of doing things	4.11	0.57
Table I. Means and standard deviations of values of organizational openness to the environment	Adapting to changing situations rather than functioning in a mechanical or preprogrammed manner	4.21	0.59
	Demonstrating a real interest in the needs of the organization's stakeholders	4.28	0.60
	Supporting the community by providing help where needed	4.09	0.57

Results from the 10 in-depth interviews add context to the survey results on dominant coalition members' value of openness to the environment. The top decision maker at a non-profit organization explained that it is crucial to receive information about the operating environment because the agency's funding is dependent on government decisions and on convincing its supporters that it can best deliver the services needed at a time of increasing competition. "I get

to make the decision at the end of the day, but 90 per cent of my day is spent within these four walls." The CEO of another non-profit said the organization needs to know, "what is happening in the sector, what is happening in the economic climate and other factors that influence us, including what is happening with the disease related to our fundraising."

The president of a public institution with more than 2,000 employees said openness to the environment is an organizational value because decisions need to be based on context. A new area of focus at this institution has been issues monitoring. "One thing that worries me that we do quite differently than we did maybe, six or seven years ago, is that piece about constantly monitoring the environment for potential disruptions." This has resulted in the creation of two new positions dedicated to issues management within the public relations department. An executive leader at another public institution with more than 2,100 employees said that as a publicly funded organization, transparency is critical and with that comes public scrutiny. The communications function is valued for "spotting red flags" before decisions are made. At the third public institution, its CEO said openness to the environment is a value since the institution's programming is responsive to the current zeitgeist. "Our staff have to have their finger on the pulse of what is happening out there. They are also seeing the analytics – we adapt on a regular basis."

A senior leader for a municipality of nearly 500,000 people said openness to the environment is a feature of working in government. Frontline workers throughout the city are trained and encouraged to pay attention to changing environmental conditions. This senior leader, who has a background in communications, said communicators are counted on to collect those fragments of information, look for trends, understand what they mean collectively and to bring that analysis to the dominant coalition. "There are also many times when it is mandated

that we get public input," the leader added. Another member of the dominant coalition working in government at a different municipality said that input from the operating environment influences not only what is done, but also timing and approach. "Information is vital to help us meet people's expectations." This leader added that having information about what neighbouring municipalities are planning is important so that, "we all act in the same way and no one is left with their pants down." A member of the dominant coalition who is a communicator working in regional government said an effort is being made to move to a model of "strategic foresight … trends and scenarios to consider as we make decisions about the future. I think we always need to do a lot of environmental analyses and context setting."

At a private sector organization, a vice-president said the operating environment is heavily regulated and therefore environmental openness for them means focusing on government relations. This changed during the COVID-19 pandemic when the organization faced new considerations from its workforce and from clients. "We had to move quickly, but so did the regulators." The CEO of another private sector organization that operates globally said there are two main pillars, commercial and operations. "Everybody supports those pillars and we need to know of changes so we can adapt to keep those two pillars standing."

RQ2: How and to what extent do dominant coalition members' perceptions of organizational autonomy impact how they perceive public relations practitioners as participants in organizational strategic management?

To measure dominant coalition members' value of organizational autonomy, Wilson (2016) used the definition of autonomy suggested by Stainton (1994) to arrive at eight items related to

substantive autonomy and procedural autonomy. These eight items were also used in this study.

See Table II.

	Items	M	SD
	Values of organizational autonomy scale	**4.09**	**0.57**
	The organization has the ability to determine its own objectives	4.05	0.56
	The organization has the authority to determine its own mission	4.13	0.57
	The organization is free to make decisions about its goals	4.19	0.58
	The organization's decision makers are primarily responsible for establishing the priorities of the organization	4.11	0.57
	The organization is free to choose the methods it will use to implement its policies.	4.09	0.57
	Stakeholders expect the organization to use its own discretion in establishing its policies.	3.92	0.54
Table II. Means and standard deviations of perceived organizational autonomy	The organization is able to choose the way it goes about accomplishing its goals.	4.11	0.57
	The organization is empowered to decide how it will achieve its objectives.	4.12	0.57

Dominant coalition members expanded on how they view and interpret organizational

autonomy during the in-depth interviews. At a unionized non-profit organization, decisions are

influenced by the relationship with the union. "Most of my time is very much dedicated to

working with our union," its executive leader said. A positive relationship with labour means

buy-in for a specific course of action and therefore more autonomy. At another non-profit, the

CEO said there are reasons to be cautious about autonomy. Internally, there were past challenges

with "rogue work" done at regional offices and externally, when there are strict government regulations related to fundraising, they help build confidence that donations are administered properly. "Operating without any constraints? No, I don't think that's going to work for us."

The president of a public institution said there are internal and external constraints that need to be carefully managed. "We place the highest value on autonomy," the president explained. "We need to show our ability to function and to make good decisions." An executive leader at another public institution said the mandate governing the organization requires it to be impartial and unbiased. "Sometimes we are at the whim of politicians making what could be considered politically expedient decisions as opposed to sound public policy." The organization values its government relations team for its relationship with politicians. At a third public institution, the CEO said the funding it receives from government is dependent on "us having the public on our side." Autonomy is a push-pull relationship with the surrounding community and freedom to operate comes from being seen as an asset.

Autonomy is a complex value for municipal governments, a member of the dominant coalition at a mid-sized city said. "Complete autonomy could result in us being irresponsible with taxpayers' dollars." At the same time, the senior director said the city needs some autonomy to carry out its plans when there are competing groups attempting to influence what is done and how it is done. Some groups employ extreme tactics. "They threatened a hunger strike if the city did not do what they wanted," the senior manager said. "It is serious, it is concerning for people's health." At another municipality, a senior director working in communications said, "some people feel incredibly invested in their city and they want to have an input on everything. Even councillors can be armchair experts on subjects like snow clearing when we have 'snow guys' who do it everyday and are better at determining the best way to do it." At a third

municipality, a member of the dominant coalition takes a practical approach to autonomy. "It comes down to risk profile and risk management." To this senior manager, this means empowering employees to take more risks and to make some decisions on their own to support residents. This is difficult to implement if elected officials have low risk tolerance.

A vice-president working in the private sector said autonomy is not a priority. "We are heavily regulated. There are tremendous external constraints that we need to adhere to and follow." This organization spends a lot of resources ensuring compliance with the government regulations, which, if followed, allows the organization to operate in a stable and profitable environment. The CEO of a global private organization said there is little value in pursuing greater external autonomy as the sector is dependent on collaborations with entities in various countries and industries. However, internally, the CEO described the organization as "the poster child for autonomy." Employees are encouraged to contribute where they can, independent of title, and "to talk to the executive team."

RQ3: How and to what extent do dominant coalition members' perceptions of the potential of public relations practitioners to act as strategists impact their perceptions of communicators taking part in organizational strategic management?

To better understand how dominant coalition members view the manager role potential of public relations practitioners, a four-item scale originally developed by Kelly (1994) and used in the study by Wilson (2016) was included in this questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree that public relations practitioners at their organizations have the potential to serve as managers, as represented by the four items in the scale. See Table III.

	Items	*M*	SD
Table III. Means and standard deviations of perceived manager role potential of the public relations department	***Perceived manager role potential***	**3.89**	**0.54**
	Manage people	3.80	0.52
	Conduct evaluation research	3.34	0.46
	Develop strategies for solving public relations problems	4.21	0.59
	Manage the organization's response to issues	4.20	0.59

To measure the extent to which members of the dominant coalition perceive that public relations practitioners are able to participate in decision making at the organizational level, this study also followed the questionnaire developed by Wilson (2016) in using items developed by L.A. Grunig *et al.* (2002) and Lauzen and Dozier (1994). Respondents were asked to estimate the involvement of the public relations function in the highest levels of decision making at their organizations. See Table IV.

	Items	*M*	SD
Table IV. Means and standard deviations of perceived public relations department participation in organizational decision making	***Perceived public relations department participation in organizational decision-making index***	3.73	0.52
	Strategic planning	3.91	0.54
	Adoption of new policies	3.54	0.49
	Major initiatives	4.01	0.56
	General operations	3.47	0.48

The in-depth interview produced varying views of public relations from the participating dominant coalition members. At a non-profit organization that employs one communicator, the

executive leader described the position as, "basically, he is the person who communicates what decisions we have made, but he's not involved in those decisions." The leader explained that the agency receives most of its funding from government and it values the privacy of the individuals it supports, therefore it has minimal external communications needs. Most communications are inward-facing and "anyone can do it," the leader said. At a second non-profit, the vice-president of marketing and communications is considered the top communicator. That organization's CEO said communicators don't necessarily need to be strategic leaders, but they need to understand how their role contributes to the strategy. The CEO believes it takes time and experience for communicators to work at a higher level.

At a public institution that employs more than 50 communicators, two of the positions operate at the executive level, one is a director the other is an associate vice-president. The institution's president said there is value in hearing directly from the communicators and that a position was recently created in the Office of the President. "Having expertise within the office that can provide sound advice, and having that advice come directly to me and not filtered through someone else or the central communications shop is really important." The president added that communicators on the executive team have to prove themselves. "Future behaviour can be predicted based on past behaviour. The more that someone has been of value, the more you are willing to trust them going forward." At another public institution, one of its executive leaders said one communicator is on the executive management team as an advisor. "Ultimately, it is the president who makes decisions, but it is helpful for the organization to have all the aspects of a potential decision. The communicators do decide how to actually roll out and implement some decisions." The CEO of a third public institution said their "brand is paramount to everything we do." As someone who has a background in marketing, the CEO invites a senior

communicator to the executive table to provide advice that is aligned with the institution's brand identity.

A senior communicator working for a municipal government said developing a reputation for being "highly strategic" is what helped their entry into the dominant coalition. "Over the years there were risks I pointed out that maybe changed the essence of what they were doing." Communicators need to show they can think strategically and earn trust before they can work at that highest level, the senior communicator added. At another municipality, a member of the dominant coalition said there is always one seat at the table reserved for communicators. "They help ensure accountability." All other communicators at this city are pure tacticians or tasked with developing secondary strategies to advance overarching priorities. "You need 20-25 years of experience to get that seat, you need to show integrity and political acuity." At a third municipality, a member of the dominant coalition said there is also a seat at the table for a communicator. "It starts at the top. The leader has to believe in the value of strategic communications," the senior manager said. "I work with a CEO who does not make a decision unless there has been consultation with communications."

At a private organization, a member of the dominant coalition said communicators are sometimes invited to join meetings with the dominant coalition to "make sure they have a good understanding of some of the rationale behind some of the decisions being made." The vice-president explained that the opportunity to join those meetings is earned "by being good at their jobs" and added that communicators "do not play an integral part in the decision making as much as they are along for the journey." The CEO of a global, private sector organization said it employs a communications director and government relations director, both with strong personalities and good at their jobs. "It's not their titles that make them influential, it is what they

bring to the table." The CEO added that completing the survey associated with this study led to thoughts about elevating the top communications positions above the Director level. "The survey opened my mind about moving those roles to the top of the house, but it depends on who you are. Not every communicator can do what they do."

Discussion

Dominant Coalition Value of Organizational Openness to the Environment

Responses to the online survey, 10-item *Values of Organizational Openness Scale* suggest the dominant coalition members who participated (n = 102) do value information from their operating environment as most responses lean toward the higher end of the scale (M = 4.20) with a relatively high level of agreement (SD = 0.59).

Of the 10 items in the scale, *innovating and experimenting to cope with changes in the organization's operating environment* is most valued (M = 4.46) by the respondents with 77 indicating it is very important (75.49%) and 13 indicating it as somewhat important (12.75%). That was validated by the in-depth interviews where the CEO of a private organization said the company is in the line of business it is in because of the equipment it owns. "Ten years from now we may decide to buy different equipment and be a different company. We are not stuck in one way, we are continually adjusting to the environment." The value placed by the CEO on anticipating and on responding to environmental changes is in line with the argument made by Kelly (1998), who suggests that organizations require ongoing information from their environments so they can adapt. The CEO explained that information likely to lead to major operational changes could come from any role within the organization, not necessarily from public relations, and to be a result of pressures on the organization's two main pillars,

commercial and operations. "Everybody supports those pillars and we need to know of changes so we can adapt to keep those two pillars standing." While the CEO sees environmental scanning as "everybody's job," public relations is counted on to stay on top of government and industry regulations around the world.

At a regional municipality in Southern Ontario, an initiative being developed aims to have communicators play a central role in exploring what should be done to recommend adjustments to ongoing environmental changes. A member of the dominant coalition said the goal is to develop a model of strategic foresight that takes into account "trends and scenarios to consider about future decisions," with communicators offering guidance and support to all units within the municipality. Similarly, the CEO of a public institution said all programming is responsive to the current zeitgeist and staff are counted on to "to have their finger on the pulse of what's happening out there … we adapt on a regular basis." These results validate research that suggests when operating environments are more uncertain and complex, the more opportunities there are for communicators to play a potential role in guiding the organization (Okura et al., 2008).

The least valued item in the scale according to respondents is, *appointing task forces (or other such work groups) to help the organization understand new situations or problems* (M = 3.89). This is also the item that appears to have the most agreement within members of the dominant coalition (SD = 0.53). None of the 10 in-depth interview participants mentioned task forces unsolicited and only the three dominant coalition members working in municipalities brought up work groups to collect information. Two types of work groups were mentioned by those three senior managers, one formed to collect information from stakeholders and the other to collect information from peers in the sector (other municipalities) to coordinate future actions.

The next-lowest scored item is outward facing, *supporting the community by providing help where needed* (M = 4.09), which also shows a high level of agreement (SD = 0.57). This is in contrast to the second-highest scored, *demonstrating responsibility for the organization's impact on its stakeholders* (M = 4.33) and responses to this item show the second-most variability (SD = 0.61), although this is still a relatively high level of cohesion. This suggests the dominant coalition members who responded value showing their organizations make a positive difference more than they value providing general support for their communities, which may not bring in recognition and associated benefits to the organization. The CEO of a public institution explained during the in-depth interview that community support is tied to the funding it receives from government. "The more they understand our value, the greater the propensity to fund us," the CEO said. Similarly, the executive leader of a non-profit said funding is tied to "convincing supporters we can deliver the services they need." For publicly funded organizations, justifying their existence is crucial.

Dominant Coalition Value of Organizational Autonomy

Dominant coalition members' responses (n = 102) to the online, eight-item *Values of Organizational Autonomy Scale* show that, similar to organizational openness to the environment, they generally place a high value on organizational autonomy (M = 4.09). The results suggest a high level of agreement (SD = 0.57).

Respondents place the highest value in the item, *the organization is free to make decisions about its goals* (M = 4.19) and there is general agreement (SD = 0.58) with 40 selecting strongly agree (39.22%) and 48 selecting agree (47.06%). During the in-depth interviews, most participants expressed a desire for more autonomy and they connected it to

working with their stakeholder groups. The executive leader of a unionized, non-profit organization said a positive relationship with labour means internal buy-in for a specific course of action and therefore more autonomy, which validates findings by Wilson and Knighton (2021) that organizations are highly strategic in using relationship management to pursue autonomy. A senior manager at a municipality said all actions are based on serving stakeholders' interests, but given the diversity of stakeholders found in any city or region, there is always a level of support and a level of opposition to every course of action. Some groups employ extreme tactics to show opposition, such as staging a hunger strike. Another senior manager with a background in public relations at a different municipality said "some people feel incredibly invested in their city and they want to have an input on everything. Even councillors can be armchair experts on subjects like snow clearing when we have 'snow guys' who do it everyday and are better at determining the best way to do it." The senior manager said public relations staff can anticipate and minimize opposition if involved early on in the planning process. These findings suggest that research conducted nearly 30 years ago by Dozier and L. A. Grunig (1992) applies in Canada today as participating dominant coalition members described symmetrical communications as a tactic used to help control their environments, including calling on the public relations function to help manage relationships with stakeholders. While no respondent to the online survey strongly disagreed, four (3.92%) indicated they disagree with the organization having freedom to make decisions about its goals. The CEO of a national non-profit said during the in-depth interview that internally, there have been past challenges associated with "rogue work" done at regional offices and that there is need for brand unity and therefore more internal autonomy was not desirable. The CEO added that more external autonomy was also not desired as government regulations help build confidence that donations are being administered properly. "Operating

without any constraints? No, I don't think that's going to work for us." Similarly, a vice-president at a private organization in a heavily regulated industry said that while ensuring compliance requires a lot of resources, the government regulations allow the organization to operate in a stable and profitable environment. In both these organizations, public relations practitioners have roles limited to tactics.

Given that participants noted during the interviews that degree of autonomy is tied to working with stakeholders, it makes sense that the lowest-ranked item is, *stakeholders expect the organization to use its own discretion in establishing its policies* (M = 3.92). This item also shows the highest level of agreement (SD = 0.54). This same item had the lowest mean when Wilson (2014) collected answers to the same set of questions in the United States (n = 118, M = 3.65). In the Canadian study analyzed here, the CEO of a global private organization explains that meeting stakeholders' needs means following the rules and regulations of the countries and industries the organization works in. This suggests that some dominant coalition members value substantive autonomy – setting their own mission and goals – more than they value procedural autonomy – determining how they are going to accomplish their mission and goals. In fact, respondents to the online survey indicated the next most-valued item is, *the organization has the authority to determine its own mission* (M = 4.13, SD = 0.57). The president of a public institution in the education sector said, "we place the highest value on autonomy" and that without it, there would be an erosion of trust. The institution relies on its external relations and government relations departments to contribute to that autonomy.

Dominant Coalition Perceptions of PR to Act as Strategists

Of the dominant coalition members who responded to the online survey (n = 102), 95 indicated they are "very familiar" (70.59%) or somewhat familiar (22.55%) with the workings, capabilities and contributions of the communications/public relations department in their organizations suggesting a high level of confidence by the participating dominant coalition members.

They were surveyed on both the *perceived manager role potential* and on *perceived public relations department participation in organizational decision-making*. At the overview level, participating dominant coalition members rated public relations practitioners slightly higher when it came to their potential as managers (M = 3.89, SD = 0.54) than when it came to having the public relations department participate in organizational decision making (M = 3.73, SD = 0.52).

When it came to working as managers, survey respondents rated the practitioners' greatest potential as being able to, *develop strategies for solving public relations problems* (M = 4.21), although a very close second was the ability to, *manage the organization's response to issues* (M = 4.20). The president of a public institution that employs more than 2,000 people said two positions were created in recent years to manage issues – both are within the public relations department (external relations). "When you have an issue or a crisis, the communications arm of the institution becomes critically important," the president said. A vice-president at a private sector organization said communications was elevated during COVID-19 as the usually stable, regulated operating environment was upended. Both responses reinforce the notion that more

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uncertainty leads to greater public relations participation in higher levels of strategic

management (Broom & Dozier, 1986; Okura et al., 2008).

Scoring lowest, close to the scale's midpoint, is public relations' ability to conduct

evaluation research (3.34), with general agreement among responding dominant coalition

members (SD = 0.46). Half of respondents did not indicate they believe public relations

practitioners can conduct evaluation research with 2 selecting "strongly disagree" (1.96%), 22

disagree (21.57) and 27 selecting "neither agree nor disagree" (26.47%). During the in-depth

interviews, some participants said openness to the organizational environmental is "everyone's

job" and they do not see environmental scanning as the responsibility of one unit, such as public

relations.

When it comes to having the public relations department participate in organizational

decision making, the CEO of a national non-profit said communicators need time and experience

to work at a higher level. Similarly, the president of a public institution said communicators have

to prove themselves before they can work with the executive team. The president added that

public relations counsel is valued and that a new public relations position was added in the

president's office at the beginning of the first term. "Future behaviour can be predicted based on

past behaviour. The more that someone has been of value, the more you are willing to trust them

going forward." A senior manager at a municipality suggested that public relations practitioners

need 20-25 years of experience to earn a seat at the dominant coalition table." The CEO of a

global, private sector organization describes the communications director and government

relations director as having the right personalities and suggested that individuals with similar

skills but different personalities would not be elevated to that level. These findings are in line

with upper echelons theory, which suggests that organizational leaders are directly influenced by

their past experiences when making decisions, including who gets a seat at the dominant coalition table (Wilson 2016).

Survey respondents rated the public relations department highest (M = 4.01, SD = 0.56) for its ability to participate in major initiatives, but lowest for general operations (M = 3.47, SD = 0.48). The executive leader of a non-profit said the organization's one public relations practitioner "communicates what decisions we have made, but he's not involved in those decisions." The executive leader added later in the interview that the organization has a 10-year reform plan currently in its infancy. Executing that plan will likely require more public relations support and opportunities for the role to have a greater scope or to be elevated. This is in line with the survey results that show public relations is valued higher when there is a major initiative, as opposed to day-to-day operations.

Contribution to Practice

The evidence uncovered by this study contributes to better understanding dominant coalition members as gatekeepers to public relations being invited to participate in the highest levels of decision-making. It can be frustrating for a public relations practitioner to devote themselves to professional development only to be continually kept away from the dominant coalition because the values and perspectives of senior leaders do not align with public relations participation in organizational strategic management. The current results will help practitioners looking for career advancement choose who they want to work for and have a clearer view of possible opportunities for upward mobility.

Another contribution of this study is the direct involvement of dominant coalition members. Notwithstanding the U.S. study by Wilson (2016), past research was typically

conducted by asking public relations practitioners for their perceptions of another group's perceptions (e.g., Berger, 2005; Lauzen & Dozier, 1994; Okura et al., 2008). While some research explored the perceptions of both practitioners and dominant coalition members (L. A. Grunig et al., 2002; Plowman 1998), they mostly focused on the characteristics of practitioners and public relations departments as opposed to the current study that focuses on the dominant coalition.

By drawing on previous public relations research, particularly upper echelons theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) and on work related to the Excellence Theory, the current study expands the reach of these studies and refines their findings.

Finally, this study is the first in Canada to explore dominant coalition members in this country in terms of their association with public relations. It shows dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations practitioners' ability to act as strategists is moderate as determined by the mean scores, $M = 3.89$ perceived manager role potential and $M = 3.73$, perceived public relations department participation in organizational decision-making. This is despite participating dominant coalition members expressing high familiarity with public relations ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 0.66$). However, by confirming that organizational openness to the environment and organizational autonomy are generally valued by dominant coalition members, the current study suggests paths for public relations practitioners to contribute toward both through relationship management, issues management, government relations and by taking on major initiatives.

Conclusion

The recurring message from the dominant coalition members who participated in this study, including those with a background in public relations, is that participation in strategic decision making is earned. Whether they perceive public relations practitioners as able to act as strategists is the strongest predictor of public relations' participation in organizational strategic management. This is in line with the finding of Wilson's U.S. study. In addition, when organizational leaders are familiar with the track record of a public relations practitioner or feel the practitioner has the right personality they are more likely to involve the practitioner in the highest levels of decision making. These findings reinforce the notion proposed by upper echelons theory that senior managers' past experiences at work shape their perceptions, which go on to influence their future decisions, including on who to invite to join the dominant coalition. The study also shows that successfully practicing issues management and leading major initiatives increase the degree to which dominant coalition members are more likely to view public relations participation in strategic management positively.

In addition, the results from the online survey and from the in-depth interviews show that organizational openness to the environment and organizational autonomy are valued by dominant coalition members, particularly those in organizations that operate as open systems. This study involving Canadian members of the dominant coalition yielded similar results to the U.S. study by Wilson (2016), which found the value of openness to the environment is positively related to the dominant coalition members' perceptions of public relations department participation in organizational decision making. However, the ability to use this value alone to predict public relations participation at the highest levels of decision making is tempered by dominant coalition members' response that while communicators are well placed to offer support

in this area, openness to the environment is, "everyone's job." The degree to which public relations participates is positively impacted by factors like specialization, such as government relations and crises, such as COVID-19, even in organizations that operate as closed systems. The second value explored by this study, autonomy, is also positively associated with perceptions of the public relations departments' participation in organizational decision making, particularly substantive autonomy. These findings are in line with those in the U.S. study by Wilson (2016), which suggests that when dominant coalition members perceive their organization as having enough freedom to determine its mission, goals, objectives, policies, and priorities, they also perceive the public relations department to play a greater role in decision making. While neither study proves there is causality, the results of the in-depth interviews reported here suggest a link between public relations and the pursuit of greater autonomy, particularly through relationship management. This reinforces the argument by Grunig (2006), who suggests that more freedom can be achieved when the public relations function helps manage the organization's interdependence with its stakeholders. The extent to which public relations is involved in the highest levels of strategic management is influenced by practitioners being seen as able to manage relationships in ways that are favourable to the organisation.

Limitations/Future Research

This study used a nonprobability sample, which does not allow for the sampling error to be calculated and therefore it is not possible to determine if the responses provided by this group apply to the entire population. It was difficult to reach individuals with senior titles directly as many do not list their email addresses or they have an employee– often an executive assistant – screening emails, which adds one more layer to delivering the invitation to participate to potential members of the dominant coalition. To overcome that challenge, snowball sampling

was used, which may result in like-mined respondents and overrepresentation in one sector. The survey did not ask respondents for their geographical location, therefore it is not possible to determine if the survey includes a true cross-Canada representation despite invitations being sent to individuals in each province and territory.

The study aimed to collect insights and responses from dominant coalition members by inviting individuals with titles that suggest they are in senior management roles. This makes it likely that dominant coalition members with informal power were missed, that is, those individuals lower down in the organizational chart or external to the organization who yield influence over organizational decision making.

The sample included 35 respondents in education (34.31%), which is a unique sector known for placing a high value on autonomy. The average CEO tenure in Canada is about three years (McNish, 2002) and dominant coalitions by their very nature continually change members, which leaves room for individuals with different values and perspectives to take over those roles.

The results of this study show there is knowledge to be gained by future research on dominant coalition members and their relationship with public relations. This would include testing values in addition to openness to the environment and autonomy, and continuing to explore upper echelons theory in the context of public relations. Given that this study likely missed dominant coalition members with informal power or external to the organization, a study that includes their participation would provide a better understanding of the bigger picture. Segmenting dominant coalition members by sector, private, non-profit or government, would allow for contrasting.

Although some dominant coalition members expressed an appreciation for having informal conversations with public relations colleagues, one area not explored sufficiently in the current research is referent power, as in being a friend or colleague with dominant coalition members, and how that influences their perspectives. The high value placed on organizational openness to the environment ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.59$) may indicate that the dominant coalition members who participated likely did so because they are open to sharing information. Future research using a random sample would address this issue.

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Appendix A

Anonymous Online Survey

Participant Consent
Thank you for taking time to participate in this anonymous survey. This research examines the relationship between your values and perceptions, and the way the communications / public relations department functions in your organization. Your responses to all questions are essential and answers will be used for statistical purposes only.

1. **Do you wish to continue?**
   a. If yes, continue to Q2
   b. If no, end survey

Senior Leaders
The first series of questions aim to confirm your involvement in strategic decision making at the organizational level or role in the top two layers of management at your organization.

2. **Are you a senior decision maker at your organization?**
   a. If yes, continue to Q3
   b. If no, end survey

3. What is your level of management?
   a. Member of the C-Suite
   b. Member of the Board of Directors
   c. Member of the Board of Governors
   d. Director
   e. Other (please specify)
   f. No answer

4. **Are you the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) / Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) / President or do you have a direct reporting relationship with the CEO / CAO / President?**
   Yes – go to Question 5
   No – go to Question 4

5. **How would you describe your reporting relationship to the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) / Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) / President?**
   a. My boss reports directly to the CEO / CAO / President
   b. My boss reports to someone that reports directly to the CEO / CAO / President
   c. I'm not sure
   d. No answer

Values
The next set of questions addresses your values as a decision maker in your organization.

6. **Listed below are statements that describe values that may or may not be important to an organization's decision makers. Please indicate the extent to which you agree that each value is important to the survival and growth of your organization.**

	VU			VI	NA	
1. Innovating and experimenting to cope with changes in the organization's operating environment	1	2	3	4	5	0
2. Appointing task forces (or other such work groups) to help the organization understand new situations or problems	1	2	3	4	5	0
3. Modifying organizational structures, policies, and procedures in response to changes inside and outside the organization	1	2	3	4	5	0
4. Demonstrating responsibility for the organization's impact on its stakeholders	1	2	3	4	5	0
5. Responding swiftly to organizational opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	0
6. Regularly and systematically seeking new information to improve the organization's products and services	1	2	3	4	5	0
7. Providing enough energy and resources to support the organization's commitment to a new way of doing things	1	2	3	4	5	0
8. Adapting to changing situations rather than functioning in a mechanical or preprogrammed manner	1	2	3	4	5	0
9. Demonstrating a real interest in the needs of the organization's stakeholders	1	2	3	4	5	0
10. Supporting the community by providing help where needed	1	2	3	4	5	0

Autonomy
The next set of questions addresses your perceptions of the autonomy of your organization, or its freedom to operate.

7. **Please indicate the extent to which you agree that each statement listed below applies to your organization.**

	SD			SA	NA	
1. The organization has the ability to determine its own objectives	1	2	3	4	5	0
2. The organization has the authority to determine its own mission	1	2	3	4	5	0
3. The organization is free to make decisions about its goals	1	2	3	4	5	0

4. The organization's decision makers are primarily responsible for establishing the priorities of the organization	1 2 3 4 5 0	
5. The organization is free to choose the methods it will use to implement its policies.	1 2 3 4 5 0	
6. Stakeholders expect the organization to use its own discretion in establishing its policies.	1 2 3 4 5 0	
7. The organization is able to choose the way it goes about accomplishing its goals.	1 2 3 4 5 0	
8. The organization is empowered to decide how it will achieve its objectives.	1 2 3 4 5 0	

8. **Now thinking about the overall autonomy of your organization, please choose the answer that corresponds with the degree of importance your organization places on its freedom to operate:**

Very Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Neither Important nor Unimportant	Somewhat Important	Very Important	No Answer
1	2	3	4	5	0

Perceptions
The next set of questions deals with your perceptions of the communications/public relations department in your organization.

9. **Please indicate the extent to which you are familiar with the workings of the communications/public relations department in your organization:**

Very Unfamiliar	Somewhat Unfamiliar	Neither Familiar nor Unfamiliar	Somewhat Familiar	Very Familiar	No Answer
1	2	3	4	5	0

10. **The items below describe management activities in which communications / public relations departments may or may not participate. To the best of your knowledge, please estimate the extent to which your organization's communications / public relations department participates in each of the following management activities in your organization.**

	SD				SA	NA
1. Manage people	1	2	3	4	5	0
2. Conduct evaluation research	1	2	3	4	5	0
3. Develop strategies for solving public relations problems	1	2	3	4	5	0
4. Manage the organization's response to issues	1	2	3	4	5	0

11. The items below describe management activities in which communications / public relations departments may or may not participate. To the best of your knowledge, please estimate the extent to which your organization's communications / public relations department participates in each of the following management activities in your organization.

	Never			Always		NA
1. Strategic planning	1	2	3	4	5	0
2. Adoption of new policies	1	2	3	4	5	0
3. Major initiatives	1	2	3	4	5	0
4. General operations	1	2	3	4	5	0

Demographic Questions
Please share about yourself

12. How many communicators work in your organization?
   a. 1
   b. 2-5
   c. 6-10
   d. 11-20
   e. 21-50
   f. More than 50
   g. I'm not sure
   h. No answer

13. In what sector does your current employer operate?
   a. Private sector
   b. Non-profit
   c. Education

    d. Healthcare
    e. Government
    f. Consulting Agency
    g. No answer

14. How long have you been in your current position?
    a. Less than one year
    b. 1-2 years
    c. 2-3 years
    d. 3-4 years
    e. 4-5 years
    f. More than 5 years
    g. No answer

15. Please indicate your gender:
    a. Woman
    b. Man
    c. Trans
    d. Non-binary
    e. Two Spirit
    f. Not listed above (please self-identify)
    g. No answer

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. At an overview level, what are your job duties?

2. How often are you included in decision-making meetings at the organizational level with other senior managers?

3. What topics – I'm looking for a general description – are discussed during those meetings?

4. Do public affairs or communicators attend those highest-level meetings?

5.   You have your title, you have institutional knowledge, you may even have personal connections to members of your senior management team -- how are you able to influence decision-making on institutional issues?

6.   Outside of those formal meetings, are your conversations with senior managers social in nature or work-related?

7.   When you have those conversations outside of formal meetings, are some of the people you talk to communicators or public affairs staff? Do you seek them out or do these conversations happen by chance?

8.   Do you believe that communicators should have a seat in your senior-most decision-making group, or dominant coalition? Why?

9.   How common do you believe it is for public relations to play an integral part of decision-making at [name of organization]?

10.   How do you believe someone in public relations can gain inclusion into this group of senior-most decision makers?

11.   Do you believe there are reasons to exclude communicators/public relations employees from the senior-most decision-making group or dominant coalition?

12.   Are there times when you believe public relations/communications employees are hired more for tactical purposes instead of strategic purposes? Why/why not?

13.   Would you say that "autonomy" is a value for [name of organization]? (Defined as the freedom to pursue self-determined plans and purposes without internal and external constraints)

14.   What management areas at [name of organization] contribute to having greater

autonomy?

15.   Would you say that openness to the environment is a value for [name of organization]?

(Defined as requiring information about your operational environment so [name of

organization] can adapt to continually changing conditions.)

16.   What management areas at [name of organization] contribute to openness to the

environment?

17.   That is the end of my questions, would you like to add anything further about the topics

we discussed today?