

The International Conference on Communication and Media 2014 (i-COME'14), 18-20 October 2014, Langkawi, MALAYSIA

Attempt to Solving Situational Problem of Alumni Employability

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Abstract

The situational theory of publics (STP), one of the most popular public relations theories, provides a mechanism for the identification of publics and their communication behaviors. The situational theory of problem solving (STOPS), an extension of the STP, is a more general theory of communication that looks at antecedents of individuals' communication and information behaviors in the process of problem solving. This conceptual paper reviews the application of STOPS to see the relevance of this theory in the context of organization (university) and publics (alumni) in solving the problem of employability. This study explores the essence and practice of public relations practitioners in The National University of Malaysia (UKM) in enhancing the reputation of the organization.

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Peer-review under responsibility of School of Multimedia Technology & Communication, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Keywords: Information acquisition; selection & transmission; problem recognition; involvement recognition; constraint recognition

1. Introduction

The success of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) demands high commitment from university (in this case, UKM) and the publics (one of the main publics is the alumni) to develop and achieve the organization's mission and objectives. Both the parties must cooperate especially in ensure the alumni employability in the market. In this aspect, UKM's main concern in terms of employability is to ensuring the quality of graduates that meet the demands of the job market. The alumni's main concern on the other hand is to secure a job that meets their own personal demand. The common problem between the university and alumni create a situation where problem solving is needed. This issue must be taken seriously to ensure the development of human capital and enhance the reputation

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of the university.

The society we live in are interwoven with much communication between parties. The publics are groups or persons who communicate with an organization, both internally and externally (Jefkins, 1998). Publics have a stake in the organization as a customer and contribute to profit oriented organization, sometimes rather known as the stakeholders. Hence, to understand the public is an important issue. Organization-public network can be strengthened and enhanced with in depth knowledge of public perception on an issue or a problem. A thorough research must be done to gain this understanding as each person's perception might be different. For example, issue of employability will not concern graduates who have secured a job, but to those who are still unemployed, this issue is of utmost importance.

This future study will be conducted with the assumption that there must be public relations practices among various parties to establish a stable relationship between organization and publics. It aims to help organization identify stakeholders' perception of the organization's reputation. This study is hoped to aid in crisis communication management in organizations when they understand their public's perception better. This study addresses employability as the problem with the hope that it serves as a useful input to universities for better progress. Universities are now increasingly aware that communication with its publics and creativity are very important to ensure a mission is accomplished.

This study will adopt STOPS as the theoretical framework in solving problem of employability in university. Through STOPS, Kim and Grunig (2011) predict significant implications for the pattern of communication between different individuals in problem-solving situations (e.g., health, consumer problems, management and political science) as well as the individuals that make up the aggregate publics that is an object in information campaigns and communication programs. Public perception will be taken into account to find out their communication behaviors. For public conscious organization, the organization must plan something upon hearing and evaluating public perception. However, what the publics view as problem may not be viewed the same way by the organization. There must be a midpoint between the expectations of the organization and the expectation of publics. Therefore, the researcher hopes to use UKM as a case to understand the perception of university and alumni on employability issues and seek the solution as a benchmark for future researchers. The understanding of essence of successful product and service is important for management to guide them in the decision-making (Cooper & Kleinschmidt 1996).

2. Situational theory of problem solving

The word problem refers to a condition, situation or experience that can affect an individual's balance in terms of emotions, thoughts, actions and sometimes physical (Compton, Gallaway & Cournoyer, 2005). Two well known theorists who introduced problem-solving approach were Dewey (1927) and Blumer (1966). According to Dewey and Bulmer, publics are critical component in the democratic process to recognize the problems that affect them, organize and act to resolve the problem. Problem solving process involves levels that are classified as entry level, intermediate level and termination level. However, each of these levels prioritizes certain elements to achieve effective problem-solving process. In this research, UKM success with proactive moves and focus on a clear mission and goals is the aim at the end of it.

James Grunig pioneered the Situational Theory of Publics (STP) in year 1966. This theory provides a method to categorize public response's to a problem, their sum and type of communicative behavior, the effect of communication to public's cognition, attitude and behavior, and the potential in committing to effort of problem solving. Grunig (1996, 1997) developes STP as a standalone communication behavior and decision-making theory. This theory was then extended to a more macro level to explain organization and public relationship. STP was then expanded to A Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) by Kim (2006) which is more specific into communicative behavior in problem solving rather than general communication behavior. Kim and Grunig (2011) specifically explained why and how individuals communicate while experiencing problematic situations. They then define "problem" as perceptual discrepancies between expected conditions and experienced conditions in a situation that resulted in an uncomfortable situation. Therefore, "problem solving" is an attempt to close the said perceived discrepancies.

Kim (2006) developes STOPS as a general theory that can be applied across all fields. Firstly, STOPS begins with

the assumption that human will be motivated in solving problems. Kim and Grunig (2011) extend the theory of STP to STOPS by expanding the dependent variables of the original theory i.e. (information seeking and processing) i.e. communicative action in problem solving, or in short CAPS that incorporates several communication behaviors. Secondly, they also expanded the theory to more general life problems. Thirdly, they have created a new variable (situational motivational in problem-solving) as a mediator between the independent variables of the STP to new dependent variables and reintroduce referent criterion as one of the elements.

These improvements are done as Kim and Grunig (2011) identify several gaps that cannot be addressed in STP. This is especially so when STP only has small indication of active communication behavior. It only uses the information acquisition (search for information) to describe an active publics. However, if we observe a real life active public communication, we will realize that its members that are not actively involved in the search of information can be active in sharing and selecting information. Moreover, the concept of reference criterion included in the earlier version of STP theory are rejected or removed because it fails to predict information seeking and behaviour (Grunig 1997). However, some researchers have been attracted to the concepts and practical benefits of clear reference criteria to classify public behavior (Kim, Ni, & Sha, 2008). Kim and Grunig (2011) consider the utility, redefine the concept, and expand it in STOPS.

3. Communicative action in problem solving (CAPS)

Kim and Grunig (2011) conceptualize CAPS as a second factor that covers six communication variables under three domains namely information acquisition, information selection and information transmission. Each domain communicators have two variables. Information Seeking (active) and attending information (passive) is under the information acquisition domain. Information forefending (active) and permitting information (passive) are put under the domain of information selection. Information forwarding (active) and information sharing (passive) meanwhile are put under the domain of information transmission. CAPS are based on the assumption that a higher level of problem solving happens when information behavior in all three domains increases.

Generally, the publics seek information as they become more motivated to solve a problem (Grunig, 1997). Public also select only certain kinds of information to solve their problems. The tendency to take in information prolonged increase inventory information, but it also creates problems when it produces too much information that is not consistent. As a result, the public must develop relevant subjective rules in this process. Normally, only certain types of information are more useful than others. Finally, active problem solvers will communicate (transmit) the information to others (Kim & Grunig 2011).

Samsudin and Latiffah (2002) discovered that when it comes to health problems, individuals pay attention to information that are relevant to them. If they feel that the health problems are not relevant to them, they will not find information or increase the potential for problem solving. It is only when they view it as a problem, will they actively pay attention, seek and attend to information that are given. Normawati, Faridah, Normah & Chang Peng Kee (2011) emphasized that attention is important in information seeking. Information processed will be retained longer and more details are remembered. Information searched are to address the need of specific information. Normawati et al. (2011) research show that most respondents highly seek information that are modest and simple enough to meet their need of information on organ donation.

Therefore in the context of this research, few things must be addressed. In order to address the problem of employability, it is proposed that UKM must first provide information that is relevant, simple and modest to its Alumni to increase the motivation of graduates to solve the problem of employability. However the question is, what is the kind of information do the alumni need from UKM? The researcher hopes to address this by understanding the perception of alumni of information needed and how UKM perceived the information needed.

Selection of information is also important in ensuring the accuracy of the information. Through a selection of information, it refers to and directed at solving the problem of obtaining and sharing information either to save a person's cognitive resources to solve problems or to optimize a settlement or a solution to one's problem. In other words, the selection of active information is directed towards finding and providing information. Information forefending is defined as the extent to which any evidence rejects or fends off certain information prior to judge the value and relevance to the task of solving a given problem. As information forefending increases, troubleshooting

becomes more specialized, systematic, and relevant information to reduce the burden of dealing with information or information that is not consistent. On the other hand, information permitting refers to the extent to which the communicant received any information related to a given problem-solving task. Typically, highly motivated problem solver try to remain open and inclusive in making an informed choice. They will try to adapt to the situation and increase the breadth of the information used to build the solution. Therefore, the more effort put in solving problem, the more likely a person will engage in the transmission of information during the early phases of problem solving (Kim Grunig & Ni, 2010; Kim & Grunig 2011; Kim, Ni, Kim, & Kim, 2012).

CAPS distinguishes between two levels of communicative activity in information forwarding and information sharing. Passive information is sharing information reactively only when someone asks for an opinion, idea, or expertise of the problem. In contrast, an active whistleblower will provide information proactively even when no one asks that self-designed information geared to give to others (Kim & Grunig, 2011). Any person who sent the information is eager to spread his perception of the problem and how to solve the issue (e.g, Shah, Cho, Eveland, Jr., & Kwak, 2005 in Kim & Grunig, 2011). The flow of information from them is voluntary, premeditated and motivated by the perception that problems has escalated. Transmission of information developed from giving problem and giving a solution to the ongoing problem situations. At the outset, the purpose of giving information is to obtain the information needed to build a solution. In the next phase, the purpose of the transmission of information is to reproduce a similar perception of the problem and to encourage settlement options, the delivery and troubleshooting.

Therefore, based on STOPS assumption of information selection and sharing be it active or passive, this research is hoped to propel ways in which it provokes the Alumni in active information selection and sharing rather than passive communication behavior. This will therefore aid the university in speeding up the employability rate of graduates and thus address the issue of employability.

4. Perceptual, cognitive, and motivational antecedents

Kim and Grunig (2011) distinguished two types of problem recognition, which are perceptual problems and cognitive problems (metaproblem). A perception of a conflict between the expected and the experience is usually the case, with the absence of existing solutions to the problem is considered the cognitive problems. Cognitive problems require an assessment of what needs to be done to bridge the gap narrowed. This is the consideration phase consisting evaluation of the perceived cause of the problem, how it can be solved, and the extent to which it is competent to solve the problem. The theory defines situations in particular public recognition of the problem as something that occurs when an individual track that should do something about the situation and stop to think about what to do (Grunig, 1997). Kim and Grunig (2011) define the purpose of recognition as a person's perceptual problem where there is something missing and did not immediately commit to the solution process. Therefore cognitive problem followed by a perception problem and it is also a perception problem solving after the failure of the preconscious.

A person suffering from the problem situation but was not able to find a quick solution to it, or do not have a mechanism to bridge the perceived psychological differences, would descend into the more problematic situation (Grunig, 1968). The level of inequality increase the probability of a stop to think about what needs to be made, but the conflict alone cannot determine the next level of thinking. There are other factors that influence the perception of problem solving to a person, such as the extent of involvement and barriers perceived in doing things (the identification of constraints). In other words, a person may stop or may not stop to think about what to do even with a high level of problem identification. Identification of the problem is the main driver but not the sole cause of cognitive communications and activities in the troubled state.

Lovelock and Weinberg (1984) in Kim and Grunig (2011) and Kim et al (2012) define engagement as the level of interest or concern. Grunig (1976) also defines it as “the perception of” people who come to have a certain level of involvement. Krugman (1997) in Kim and Grunig 2011 and Kim et. al 2012 defines the level of involvement as the extent to which a person connects himself with the problem or the extent and nature of a person's communicative action influenced by the participation of a clear relationship with the troubled state. When seen how their relationship to the matter of subject is low, one may become passive in the communication behavior to engage in information processing (Grunig, 1976). Thus, through STOPS it believes it is better to conceptualize engagement as

perception variable, not conceptualize it as a variable that triggers the perception. Kim and Grunig (2011) limit the scope of the level of engagement as what is regarded as a related and not something that is completely. Therefore, the determination of the level of involvement (Grunig, 1976) is expressed as the identification of the involvement of a felt connection between the self and the problem situation.

In addition to the concept of participation and recognition of the problem, some communication theorists defined the concept of identification constraints (Grunig, 1989) in their study. Identification of constraints is one of the two variables of the original concept developed by Grunig (1968) in an earlier version of STP. Definition of constraints in STP is the identification of constraints that occurs when "people accept that there are obstacles in a condition that limits their ability to do anything about the situation (Grunig, 1997). In a study of large landowners and farmers in Colombia, Grunig (1971) finds that people have little need to communicate in situations where there are barriers preventing people from making choices" (Grunig, 1997). Identification of constraints discourage communication behavior such as searching and processing information, even if the presenter has a high identification of the problem and or the level of involvement realize (Ramanadhan & Viswanath, 2006) in (Kim & Grunig 2011; Kim et al. 2012).

According to Grunig (1968), a reference criterion is determined by the antecedent condition, especially from social contacts individuals and from past behavior, which is partly determined antecedent condition. Although the reference criteria has number of features of perception, it is closer to cognition as it taps the ready steps and used knowledge's and the rules of inference from past experience to solve a problem (Higgins, 1996). Therefore any system of knowledge or subjective judgments affects the problem solving approach. Reference criteria may include guidelines or rules of decision-making are seen as relevant to a given problem. Problem solvers take reference criteria of problematic situations in advance. According to Kim and Grunig (2011), if a person has a problem to retrieve a solution that can be used from the internal storage, then one may show greater communicant activeness to compose a new solution. At the same time, the person will be eager to select and present information as reference criteria. Overall, therefore, reference criteria will lead to the communicant activeness in problem solving. In addition to objective criteria or aspects of reference, STOPS also include more subjective aspects such as the presence and extent of delusion and or intentional thought toward a final state in problem solving.

Simply put, when it comes to STOPS, problem recognition, level of involvement, constraint recognition and also referent criterion are all interlinked variables that will contribute to a solution of a problem. This research therefore will address each of these variables from the perspective of UKM and also its alumni to give a wholesome picture of problem solution when it comes to employability.

5. Situational motivation in problem solving

Azizi, Asmah, Zurihanmi and Fawziah (2005) said that motivation is the tendency of an organism or a movement spurred by an incentive. STOPS looks into situations that are special and goal-oriented in nature and seek to spur the motivation to solve a problem. After doing some researches to classify publics with their situation motivation, professional communicators will be able to evaluate the relevance of information to a small group of publics, for example: publics or latent public (public who have apathy) before starting the communication program.

According to Kim and Grunig (2011) problem, involvement, and identification of constraints are related to perception and situation. Perception is subjective to the individual but a person will act on their perceptions, motivation and cognition (i.e. criterion reference). We can say that the perception of the situation and the seriousness of the problem seen or ability of the problem, and connectivity influence the next stage of adaptive communication behavior related to perceived conditions.

In conclusion, the researcher hopes that by applying STOPS into the context of UKM and its alumni relationship in solving the problem of employability will yield two results. First, the researcher hopes that the findings will prove to be a template for universities to speed up employability rate as well as motivation among graduates. Secondly, the researchers hope to understand how organization perception of problem contributes to the theory of STOPS and churn new variables for better enlightenment.

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