Business Organization as Public Partner of Community: A Social Vision of the Organization Through the Public Engagement

Letizia Lo Presti[1] & Giulio Maggiore[1]

[1] Department of Law and Economics, University of Rome Unitelma Sapienza, Rome, Italy

Correspondence: Letizia Lo Presti, Department of Law and Economics, University of Rome Unitelma Sapienza, Viale Regina Elena, Rome 295 00161, Italy.

Abstract

The importance of private organizations for social and economic development has been a motivating factor for understanding the role of public engagement as a lever of competitive advantage.

In recent years the public engagement construct was defined and conceptualized differently in public sector. Instead, few papers have analysed the implications of public engagement for private sector. The difficulty to contextualize and conceptualise correctly public engagement for the private sector is liable for the lack of a thorough description of its antecedent factors and main definitions.

This research uses a Systematic Literature Review as research method and analyses 21 papers published in the main journals of management. The study found that public engagement and community engagement are the main conceptual approaches used to explain the engagement of private sector with their publics. Social and dialogical dimensions of communication are factors influencing the engagement of the publics in the private sector. This research aims to study public engagement in a management perspective and advance the understanding of this construct also in private organizations.

Keywords: public engagement, private sector, systematic literature review, community engagement, corporate social responsibility

1. Introduction

The general practice of private organizations is to create own prosperity. Firms create also national economic growth by increasing sales and commercial activities. The private sector is also socially responsible by explicitly linking their social contribution to product sales. Besides philanthropy activities (Shaw & Post, 1993; Schwartz & Carroll, 2003; Schwab, 2008), in the time, the role of companies is changed firstly towards the corporate social responsibility (Jones, 1980; Garriga & Melé, 2004), secondly on creating shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2019). Indeed, today there is a need to integrating societal improvement into economic value creation itself by means of social engagement. With their concept of the so-called "triple helix," Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff (2000) gave strength to the idea that the State, universities and companies do not work independently but together in order to develop a competitive marketplace in which the cooperation guarantees the development of the territory.

Firms are considered crucial for the social and economic involvement of the territory. Companies are more and more involved in activities of social and environment initiatives. For this reason, to engage the public seems to be a prerogative to increase the customers' trust. The concept of engagement in recent years is becoming a central topic for public and private organizations. Engaging helps organizations to communicate and rest in contact with stakeholders. In addition, engagement is an evaluable lever to communicate brand identity and fidelize customers. At the same time, a public dimension of engagement in private sector is emerging. In general, in the public sector, public engagement means all of activities that involve citizen, non-profit and public administration in citizenship, democracy and social wellbeing (Marino & Lo Presti, 2019; Rowe & Frewer, 2005). In this sense the concept of public it is referred to citizens, non-profit organizations, OMG, associations that can have an interest in the activities of a private or public organization. In such cases, the term usually used is civic or public engagement (Marino & Lo Presti, 2019).

Instead a social dimension of firm comes from the corporate social responsibility. Some authors include the concept

of public engagement within the main concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). For example Hung-Baesecke, Chen and Boyd (2016) found that CSR served as a driver of trust in business and found that there is positive connection between public engagement (i.e., sharing positive opinions online, buying product/service purchase or defending the company) and general business trust. While some authors (Noland & Phillips, 2010; Phillips, Freeman & Wicks, 2003) argue that stakeholder engagement cannot be considered the same as CSR or philanthropy (Phillips *et al.* 2003) because "stakeholder engagement, just in itself, is neither necessarily positive nor negative" (Noland & Phillips, 2010 p. 40; Greenwood, 2007). Insteed Bowen, Newenham-Kahindi & Herremans (2010) use a systematic literature review to investigate when, how and why companies benefit from community engagement approaches. The authors define community engagement strategy as "the subset of a firm's corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities that are directed towards individual citizens and community groups" (p. 2). Even if this paper has the merit to define the meaning of community engagement, it does not investigate the concept of public engagement in a managerial perspective and takes in consideration only the different strategies that can be used by firms to be more community-oriented. This paper instead extends the concept of community considering the "public" role of firms according with Caroll (1998) and delines the anticedents and consequences of public engagement from organization point of view. Finally, this paper investigates the "public" concept of engagement as a complex set of activities for stimulating collaborations between firm-citizen/institution/association. While for many authors consumer engagement is seen as a factor that fuels consumer trust (e.g. Hollebeek, 2011; Casalo, Flavian, & Guinaliu, 2007), little has been studied from the point of view of public marketing and therefore as an opportunity for firms to activate trust, collaboration and social image. The purpose of this study, given the current literature, is to shed more light on this issue in order to better understand the role of public engagement in the private organizations. To address this issue, the present study, by means of systematic literature review, investigates the "public engagement" construct and individuates main definitions, consequences and antecedents of public engagement in the business organizations through an investigation of main literature in the management sector.

The results of this research offer insights for both scholars and practicioners. From a theoretical standpoint, the present research calls for deeper insight for into the role of public engagement beyond the Corporate Social Responsibility. In particular it answers the request for a clearer understanding of the direct relation between the social role of firms and the engagement of stakeholders to the decision-making process. Therefore, the analysis tackles a real concern in public marketing research and extends the understanding of feature of public engagement in the business. Given the importance of engagement, the expected implications of this study are relevant. What are the terms and aspects related to the concept of public engagement in private management? What are the variables involved in defining the public engagement construct? What are the main reference theories? By addressing these questions, this study aims to assist managers to use the public engagement. For this reason, this study provides a broad view of engagement as a dynamic construct. Secondly, this study uses Systematic Literature Review to classify managerial and social science literature in order to identify the antecedent and consequences of engagement construct in the private sector.

2. Method

The research method used in this study is the Systematic Literature Review (SLR). Research design is a plan systematically organized, based on certain assumptions, or procedures. The goal is to identify, evaluate and interpret available information regarding a research topic. It is intentionally used for gathering updating current personal knowledge and experience on a topic, reviewing existing practices, developing and updating practice guidelines, and developing work-related policies. SLR is used to address well-focused questions concerning a specific subject.

To identify a representative sample of studies that could express and synthesize the development of the scientific discussion on public engagement, we used the methodology adopted by Marino and Lo Presti (2019). In this sense We decided to include only papers which were published in scientific journals listed in Harzing's Journal Quality List which periodically updates scientific journals based on their relevance (by impact factor, originality and rigor of research). Then, based on the objectives of our analysis, as in Marino and Lo Presti (2019), research has been limited to the "Marketing", "PSM" and "Communication" subject areas. Finally, in order to identify the most influential works, we selected only the papers published in the major A & A * Journals according to the Australian Journal of Business Deans Council (ABDC 2013) and published in the Harzing's Journal Quality List.

"Public engagement", and other keywords with related meaning that could elicit additional information as, "public involvement", "civic engagement", "community engagement" and "civic involvement", are used as search strings to classify the primary sources of knowledge relevant to the topic. Articles which are not connected to the themes identified are excluded from the collation. The review is carried out using Davies and Crombie (1998) suggestions.

Since our goal is to understand how the concept of public engagement fits into the managerial and social sciences, we have selected the best journals and we have screened to identify those journals relevant to the area we wanted to investigate. We have removed those who, despite presenting one of the keywords, did not actually explore the topic of public engagement in the business organizations. The articles deemed relevant instead were collected and analyzed according to the following criteria: the methodology used, the factors influencing public engagement, the definition provided, the level of analysis, the benefits of public engagement within the managerial perspective. Table 1 illustrates the criteria of analysis used to select papers.

Table 1. Analysis conducted on the selected papers

Criteria of analysis	Meaning
Definition	Main definition of engagement
Theoretical approach	Principles devised to explain the public engagement
Level of analysis	The subjects of research investigation
Factors	Antecedents of public engagement
Consequences	The effect of engagement activities

Source: our elaboration

3. Results

21 papers have been selected. The recurring keywords were "public engagement" and "community engagement". The analysis spans a considerable time period of 10 years, from 2008 to 2018. The theoretical approaches used in the selected papers are Theory of Commons, Practice Theory, Stakeholder theory, Planned behavior theory and Social capital, while other contributions are limited to carrying out only reconnaissance of the literature on the topic. The definitions that are provided for the interpretation of public engagement are twofold and referable essentially to "public engagement" and "community engagement" (Table 2).

Table 2. Conceptualizations of public engagement in private organization

Criteria of analysis	Meaning
Subject of the research	Enterprises
Level of analysis	online community; publics; societal stakeholders; citizens;
Keywords	Public engagement and community engagement
Methodological approach	Qualitative/quantitative
Theoretical approach	Theory of Planned behaviour; Stakeholder Theory; Theory of Commons

Source: our elaboration

In the first case we have found a definition of public engagement as the set of activities or actions capable of interacting, collaborating, communicating with stakeholders. In this case, consumers are seen as citizens with a strong civic sense. The company is active to trigger the public engagement process. 2 articles recognize in the Public-Private partnership and in the Political entrepreneurship, two innovative tools for community involvement. Public / community engagement is a management tool aimed at overcoming a managerial crisis or increasing stakeholder salience, useful for building coalitions in public-private partnerships and for improving community-organization relationships.

In the second case, community engagement can be considered both as the engagement of consumers that is activated through social media but also as the involvement of consumers-citizens in the decision-making process. In the latter case, we believe valuable the definition of Bowen *et al.* (2010) according to which community engagement is the involvement of groups of people whose actions of the organization have an effect on social well-being.

This new contextualization of the company in a community context is recent (2012-2018). Although it can be

associated with the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility, it is believed that it goes beyond this perspective because it places the company as an actor at the center of a community (Noland & Phillips, 2010; Phillips et al., 2003) and uses social media and the lever of involvement to implement its public / community engagement activities. Tables 3 and 4 present the summaries of the review on main factors and benefits of public engagement in the management.

3.1 Definitions

Different definitions are given to the concept of public engagement. Men and Tsai (2015; 2013) argue that public engagement is seen both as a new paradigm and as the effort of organizations to interact and collaborate with their stakeholders. It is defined as a behavioral construct with hierarchical activity levels (from the passive message to a two-way communication) (Men & Tsai, 2014) that can be manifested in the public in two ways: "reactive consuption" and "proactive contribution". Cho, Schweickart and Haase (2014) do not give a definition of public engagement but make it fall within the sphere of public relations. For Charlebois and Acker (2016), public engagement refers to the activities that are put in place by the organization to interact with consumers and society.

Willis (2012) proposes to address the issue of engagement from a community "stakeholder" perspective. By exploring Ostrom's research (1990; 2003), Willis (2012) affirms that public engagement should integrate the practice of public relations with social good rather than following organizational interests exclusively. For the author, community can benefit the organization: together with the community, the organization can activate virtuous "mutual problem solving". Willis (2012) proposes a partnership with the community stakeholders. These partnerships will allow collaborative management, for example in the field of environmental management and sustainability, of a range of social dilemmas and wicked problems. Therefore, Willis (2012) extends the concept of public relations with the idea that it is important to look at external relations as a way to expand the opportunities offered by the relationship with stakeholders. Also, the author uses the concept of triple bottom line theory to detect the social role that companies have in the society.

Brodie, Brady and Domegan (2008) consider public engagement a relevant concept but must consider all stakeholders (not just consumers) including the local community, distributors, internal and external stakeholders. The authors take the example of public engagement applied to universities, to affirm the need to apply social marketing to contemporary marketing practices. In fact, Brodie et al. (2008) believe that social marketing can benefit society and organizations that adopt it by co-creating benefits for both. Instead, the factors that affect the company's engagement are related to the adoption of a relational, interactive and communicative approach. Ostrom (1990; 2003) emphasizes the key role communication plays in community engagement by helping to build the social capital needed to bring together groups and individuals. This is consistent with the study by Bowen et al. (2010). The authors define a community engagement strategy as "the pattern of activities implemented by firms to work collaboratively with and through groups of people to address issues affecting the social well-being of those people" (p. 2). Finally, for Tsai and Men (2018) public engagement was theorized as a strategic necessity for the preservation and enhancement of stakeholder ties. In this sense, public engagement could be considered a tool of public marketing in the private organization context.

3.2 Level of Analysis

The different approach to public engagement is attributable to the different type of actors involved. In particular, in the community engagement approach, engagement is addressed to the community (both consumers and territory). The levels of analysis mainly concern the subjects to whom the result is addressed. When investigating public engagement, the analyzes are mostly aimed at studying the involvement of wider audiences. In this case the reference that is made is to the publics in a broader sense (Men and Tsai, 2015, 2013; Cho *et al.*, 2014). While Charlebois and Acker (2016) refer to corporate stakeholders. For Charlebois and Acker (2016) the public that must be involved, coincides with the consumers who, according to the authors, thanks to social media also behave as citizens ready to protect their rights towards an organization that does not always respect and protects the territory in which the firm operates and extracts profit.

3.3 Factors Affecting Public Engagement

There are different factors that can generate public engagement (Table 3). According to Men and Tsai (2015; 2013) social media and its factors affect public engagement. The authors find that the "agreebleness" and "ruthlessness" indicators affect the construct. For Cho et al. (2014), public engagement consists of three levels: like, share, comment. Nevertheless, Wei, Wang, Yu and Zhao (2019) affirm that firms may gain public engagement though information release on micro-blogging but this does not mean that if organization increases information on social

networks, public engagement improves.

The quality of the relationship, and establishing two-way communication, are also intervening factors in the involvement of the public. Social recognition also leads to greater engagement. The effects are connected to the benefits that a public engagement activity can give to the companies that operate in that territory. In particular, the keywords used are public, community, civic and involvement engagement. The main factors connected to the public engagement approach concern social media and relational approach. Even listening programs help to increase the public engagement (Charebois & Acker, 2016). Rules of conduct that promote cooperation are also considered important.

Table 3. Factors affecting public engagement in the private organizations

Variables	No. papers	Factors	Authors
Relational approach and quality	6	- Social interaction - Relational oriented factors (parasocial interaction) - Credibility resources - Policy entrepreneurs - Cooperation between community-organization - Participation of the people - Organizations provide resources proactively and strategically and create values for users	Men and Tsai (2015; 2013); Cho *et al.* (2014); Brodie *et al.*, (2008); Hartmann *et al.* (2015); Zhu (2012)
Social media	4	- Social media (community identification, parasocial interaction, perceived corporate character) - Social media foster public engagement	Men and Tsai (2013; 2015); Hung-Baesecke *et al.* (2016); Wigley and Lewis (2012).
Communication and dialogue	4	- Listening projects - Understand and listening consumers - Face to face communication - Two –way communication stimulates the dialogue	Charlebois and Van Acker (2016); Willis (2012); Cho *et al.* (2014); Wigley and Lewis (2012).
Relation	6	- Brand/organization appeal - Quality of the relation - Understanding consumers' needs - Social and informational value created within the online community - Attitude and individual behavior	Baldus Voorhees, C., & Calantone, (2015); Men and Tsai (2013); Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann (2005); Cho *et al.*, (2014); Charlebois and Van Acker (2016); Hartmann et al. (2015)
Personal identification	3	- Social status - Identification with the brand	Baldus *et al.* (2015); Algesheimer et al. (2005); Hartmann et al. (2015)
Trust	2	- CSR served as a driver of trust in business and it has a positive effect on public engagement. - Public engagement throught WeChat gives trust the organization and more committment in the relationship with the organization	Hung-Baesecke et al. (2016); Men and Tsai (2018)

Source: our elaboration

3.4 Benefits and Consequences of Public Engagement in the Business Sector

One of the benefits of public engagement is linked to the correct use of social media (Men and Tsai, 2015; 2012). Through social media, public engagement can cause personal interaction, identification in the community and public-organization interaction. Public engagement is also strengthened when organizations proactively and strategically provide resources and create values for the users" (Men and Tsai, 2015 p. 396). Also for Cho et al. (2014), social media can be a valid tool for public engagement that can improve the quality of the relationship between stakeholders and organization and build a dialogic relationship between the parties. The authors stress the importance of two-way communication to stimulate dialogue and relationship. The mutual benefits it is another important consequence of public engagement. Clark and Record (2017) show that a local area, where business owners communicate with community members and other local businesses, is associated with greater levels of civic and political engagement. This leads to a rethinking of the support given to stakeholders. In this sense for Clark and Record (2017), local governance may benefit more from special partnerships with local companies. Indeed, for the authors firms can be partners in serving and supporting their communities: "among locally owned firms, by virtue of denser connections to people and institutions within a specific place and a greater embedding of social motivations in economic decisions, a firm' s ownership will be more civically engaged with its local community*"* (Clark and Record, 2017, p. 878).

Table 4. Benefits of public engagement initiatives

Variables	No. papers	Benefits	Authors
Intention to participate	1	- The engagement of the brand community has a positive impact on the intention to join, on the intention to participate, on the intention to suggest the brand and on pressure to comply with the rules	Algesheimer et al. (2005)
Identity of community	1	- The engagement activities make you feel good and feel part of a whole.	Hartmann *et al.* (2015)
Personale Interaction and community identification	5	- Through social media, public engagement can cause personal interaction, community identification, and improve public-organization interaction. - Create a sense of affiliation and belonging to the community and build coalitions - Stakeholder salience - Deliberative initiatives improve citizen feelings and expectations about the governmental projects and can potentially improving the customization of projects to local conditions	Men and Tsai (2013; 2015); Charlebois and Van Acker (2016); Boyer, Van Slyke and Rogers (2015); Zhu (2012)
Social capital	2	- Involvement helps to build the necessary social capital to bring groups and individuals closer together - Involvement defines and transforms the local community according to the logic of global capital	Willis (2012); Mayes McDonald & Pini (2014)
Mutual benefits	2	- Multual benefits for organizations and community - Local governance might benefit more from specific collaborations with local firms	Brodie et al. (2008) Clark and Record (2017)
Managerial crisis	1	- Community engagement is a management tool useful to overcome a managerial crisis	Williams and Olaniran (1998)

Source: our elaboration

For Charlebaois and Acker (2016) stakeholder engagement, through engagement initiatives such as Ambassador

program and Growing Your Voice, can increase the level of legitimacy of the organization in the eyes of its stakeholders. In this case the authors identify the organization's engagement initiatives as actions for obtaining greater legitimacy in the territory in which they operate.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This systematic literature review analyzes businesses and the most common keywords are "public engagement" and "community engagement". This construct enfolds a restricted corpus of contributions that are varied in their theoretic approaches which originate mainly in the Theory of Commons, the Practice Theory, the Stakeholder Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior. There are two definitions given for public engagement originating basically from two keywords. On the one hand, public engagement is a set of activities or actions capable of interacting, collaborating and communicating with stakeholders. In this definition it is possible to include also concept of social stakeholders: consumers are seen as citizens with a strong sense of civic duty (the keyword is "public engagement"). Also, public engagement is identified with two innovative instruments, the Public-Private partnerships (Boyer *et al.* 2015) and the Policy entrepreneurs (Zhu, 2012), as opportunities for involving the community.

On the other hand, public engagement is found inside a wider and more general context, that is, the community context (of consumers or citizens). The engagement represents a process through which the members of a community (including the brand community) can identify themselves by feeling part of a whole (Algesheimer et al., 2005; Baldus et al., 2015; Yap & Lee, 2014; Hartmann et al., 2015). In this case every member of the community participates and is involved in the decision-making process. The social networks facilitate this process. This latter meaning of public/community engagement has a direct influence on the participants (influencing their loyalty to the community, helping to construct the social capital and to cooperate).

Public/community engagement can be considered an instrument to overcome a managerial crisis or increase stakeholder salience, useful for constructing coalitions in the public-private partnerships as well as improving community-organization relations. This new contextualization of businesses in a community context is recent (2012-2008). Although it can be associated to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility, it is thought that it goes beyond this perspective because businesses become the central actor of a proactive community vision. This new social approach broadens the concept of responsibility leading it towards a more participative and hetero-directed dimension. Moreover, this new approach includes the use of the social media to implement its activities for public/community engagement. The most recent studies on this subject of engagement through the use of the social media, offer interesting research ideas on the role offered by the new technology for mediating interaction between Institutions-Citizens, Institutions-Businesses and Businesses-Citizens.

Moreover, a new and recent conceptual research enquiry has been outlined, that of "public/community engagement", which studies businesses from a marketing management perspective. This new classification opens new ambits of investigation for managerial studies and above all in relation to the private-public role of businesses in the light of the opportunities offered by new communication technologies. A careful analysis of the antecedents and the consequences of public engagement activities have allowed us to identify some traits common to the construct investigated in the context of marketing management. Public engagement is a strategic tool for companies thanks to its relational and practical value (Hollebeek, 2011; Marino and Lo Presti, 2019). Especially, relational valence is a concept confirmed by the Rowe and Frewer (2005) studies that see public engagement as a mechanism that activates participation and recognize a two-way communication process as a trait of this form of engagement.

The exchange of information between the parts creates value that changes and reinforces the relationship between the subjects involved, initiating a virtuous cycle that generates continuous improvement and, in the end, leads to the creation of value. In private management, public engagement opens a new research enquiry that envisages an active and proactive role for businesses in sharing their activities and involving not only their consumers but also the community itself in the search for long lasting legitimacy.

Such organizations must be responsive to their stakeholders (community, students, residents, etc.) and their expectations and priorities. Profit marketers need to learn how to communicate with their stakeholders to promote connections between community members and improve ties between them. Therefore, profit and non-profit organizations should institutionalize public engagement to create mutual benefits and make their programs more accessible. Precisely because of its relevance, public engagement must be managed adequately because, as Kougiannou and Wallis (2019) affirm, the community tolerates corporate hypocrisy to a degree. However, this erodes legitimacy as hypocrisy is unbearable.

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