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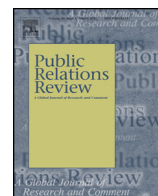
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Research in brief

Toward a theory of situational support: A model for exploring fundraising, advocacy and organizational support

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ABSTRACT

Through replication with three national survey datasets ($N = 658$, $N = 673$, $N = 208$), this study extends research aimed at developing a new model that combines variables from the situational theory of problem solving and the theory of reasoned action to explain communication and participation related to fundraising events. Findings from the three studies provide empirical evidence for a new model and an emerging theory of situational support, which may help explain how and why individuals come to support certain causes, events or organizations.

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1. Introduction

According to The Giving Institute, individual, corporate and foundation contributions to nonprofit organizations in 2014 totaled more than $358 billion, and the vast majority of donations (72%) for many years now have come from individuals. Many of these organizations rely on peer-to-peer fundraising events such as walks, runs or rides. While some sort of affinity to the cause is often the impetus for participation in such events, we know little else about the motivational and communicative processes that influence individuals' decisions in this area.

Despite much research being conducted related to nonprofits and fundraising (see e.g., Kelly, 1998; Waters, 2008), scholars and practitioners lack a clear model to help explain the antecedents to communication and behavioral intentions as it relates to organizational support. To advance these aims, the authors explore fundraising events as a way to better understand the underlying motivations related to situational support. It is anticipated that findings will not only help nonprofit organizations develop more sophisticated communication for fundraising events, but also provide a foundation for theoretical advancement as it relates to other situational support scenarios such as political campaigns, advocacy or employee engagement initiatives.

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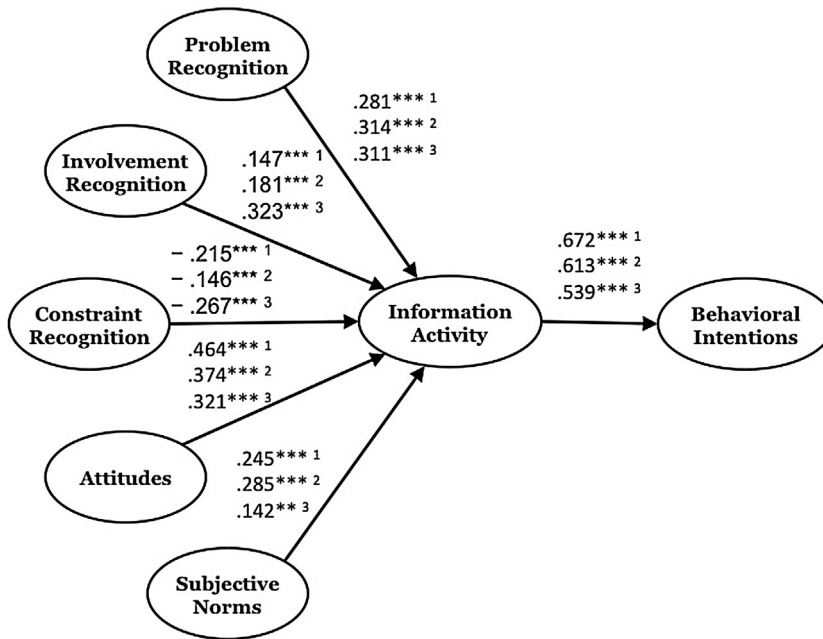   [1] Contact the first author for the complete study.

Fig. 1. Mediation model for emerging theory of situational support with path coefficients from studies 1–3.
Note: Unstandardized path coefficients are reported. $^*p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$. $R^2 = .676, .689$, and $.722$ for the model of behavioral intentions regressed on all independent and mediator variables in studies 1–3, respectively. Numbers in superscripts denote the study number. Study 1 = Relay for Life. Study 2 = Race for the Cure. Study 3 = March for Babies.

Furthermore, scholars have called attention to the lack of theoretical development related to nonprofit communication (Sisco, Pressgrove, & Collins, 2013). This research seeks to fill that gap by combining variables from the situational theory of problem solving (Kim & Grunig, 2011) and the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). These two theories have been used for decades to predict communication and behavior, and they have complementary yet distinct variables that help explain stakeholder motivations. This research extends previous research in this area (McKeever, 2013), by proposing a new model that may be useful for scholars and practitioners interested in understanding the idea of situational support.

2. Method

The study that this research replicates and extends combined variables from the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) and the theory of reasoned action (TRA) and found that a combination of the theory variables significantly predicted college students' intentions to participate in the campus-based event, Relay for Life benefiting the American Cancer Society. Based on the idea that information activity (information seeking, attending and sharing) might mediate the relationships between the core independent variables of the two theories and behavioral intentions, the current study proposed the following hypotheses and tested a new model for the theory of situational support (Fig. 1) among a national population.

H1–H2. Information activity will mediate the relationship between problem recognition (H1) and involvement recognition (H2) about the health issue and behavioral intentions to participate in health-related nonprofit fundraising events.

H3–H5. Information activity will mediate the relationship between constraint recognition (H3), attitudes (H4) and subjective norms (H5) about health-related nonprofit fundraising events and behavioral intentions to participate in such events.

In order to generate nationally-based respondent pools for three studies, the web-based micro-task platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was used for subject recruitment. At the beginning of the online survey, respondents were asked to "indicate which nonprofit organization and fundraising event you have in your community," among the options of March for Babies benefiting the March of Dimes, Race for the Cure benefiting Susan G. Komen for the Cure, or Relay for Life benefiting the American Cancer Society. Based on this initial choice, respondents were then directed to questions tailored to the mission of each organization and event. Other than tailoring items based on the mission of the organization, the survey questions were identical, and measures were based on previous research (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Kim & Grunig, 2011; McKeever, 2013).

3. Findings

Using the MTurk interface, a total of 1539 workers completed the questionnaire. Based on the organizations/events chosen by participants, there were 673 respondents in the Race for the Cure study, 658 respondents in the Relay for Life study, and 208 respondents in the March for Babies study. All three study samples were fairly comparable in terms of demographic characteristics. Respondents were approximately equally split between male and female. The average respondent age ranged from 29 to 33. The average annual household income for all three samples was between $40,001 and $50,000. Respondents primarily fell into two education levels: "some college" and "bachelor's degree." In terms of race, while most race or ethnicities assessed were represented in each study, the majority of respondents across all three studies were white or Caucasian.

Prior to testing the study's hypotheses, summary statistics and intercorrelations among the theory variables were analyzed. The pattern of correlational relationships among study variables reflects the associations posited by the two theories from which the measures were derived, and the nature of these associations were consistent across all three studies. This pattern of significant relationships also offered support for the empirical viability of the study's hypothesized mediation model (see Fig. 1).

To test this study's hypotheses (H1–H5), the PROCESS macro for SPSS was used to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals for estimates of the indirect effects. In all three studies, the independent variables were tested individually for their indirect effect on behavioral intentions through information activity, while controlling for the remaining variables in the model. As shown in Fig. 1, results from the analyses revealed a significant positive indirect effect of problem recognition on behavioral intentions through information activity in each study, offering support for **H1**. There were also significant indirect effects of constraint recognition on behavioral intentions, though these effects were negative, which follows past situational theory research. Thus, H2 was supported. Findings also indicated that there were significant positive indirect effects of involvement recognition, attitudes, and subjective norms on behavioral intentions in each of the studies. Thus, **H3**–**H5** were all supported.

To assist with interpretation of these findings, Fig. 1 depicts the full model with unstandardized path coefficients leading from the key independent measures to the proposed mediating variable of information activity (*a* path), as well as the path coefficient leading from the mediator to the outcome measure of behavioral intentions (*b* path) in all three studies. Each of the indirect effects reported in the figure offer support for the proposed theory of situational support, with information activity mediating the relationship between problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, attitudes, subjective norms and behavioral intentions. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed below.

4. Discussion

By proposing a new model that combines variables from both STOPS and TRA, this research sought to explain and predict communication and participation behaviors related to fundraising events and nonprofit support. This research helps answer the call put forth by some scholars for theory development in public relations and strategic communication, particularly as it relates to nonprofit organizations (e.g., Sisco et al., 2013).

Of primary importance, this research offers two key theoretical advancements in our understanding of the relationship between communication and behaviors. First, this model stresses the importance of information activity, in active and passive forms, as a conduit to intentions, which may lead to behaviors in the form of support (i.e., situational support). In this way, it bridges the gap between research that focuses on communication, and research that focuses on behaviors, by including elements of both outcomes in one fairly parsimonious model

Second, findings offer more robust insight into the key variables that predict behavioral intentions and participation, which are of utmost importance to organizations that rely on public support. Findings from the three current studies indicate that collectively, variables from both theories explain more about behavioral intentions than either of the theories by themselves, when mediated by information activity. These results extend previous research and provide additional support for an emerging theory of situational support.

Beyond theoretical advancement, these findings have value for communication practitioners, as well as educators and students. Public relations planning and stakeholder targeting are improved when the factors that influence behavior are understood. For instance, understanding that problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, attitudes and subjective norms affect behavioral intentions through information activity, provides a new model for communication campaign planning and education. The implication is that to move an audience to behavior, you must first motivate them to pay attention, look for more information, and share what they have learned. In so doing, campaign strategists will increase the likelihood of desired behavioral outcomes.

In the case of fundraising events benefiting nonprofit organizations, understanding the theory variables that predict situational support offers opportunities for improving messaging strategies and tactics to motivate key publics to participate. For example, knowing that attitudes and subjective norms played such an important role in predicting support may indicate that organizations would have more success if they developed messaging aimed at increasing positive attitudes about fundraising events and/or by targeting norms through communication that emphasizes the community aspects of such events. Additionally, minimizing the constraints involved in supporting such events or organizations might help further increase information activity and behavioral intentions to participate or support such events and organizations.

5. Conclusions

Findings from this study advance an emerging theory of situational support. This theory enhances our understanding of both the underlying motivations for individuals to engage with an organization, as well as key factors that mediate the process from motivations to behavioral intentions (information attending, seeking and sharing). It should be noted that this study aimed to propose a parsimonious model that would help explain organizational support and did not include all of the variables that have been used in past STOPS research (such as the full communicative action variable), nor in research using evolutions of the TRA (such as the theory of planned behavior or reasoned action approach). Future research could increase external validity by testing the theory in situations as disparate as involvement in policy decisions, consumer purchase intentions or brand advocacy, voter behavior or political party support, employee engagement, receptiveness to crisis messaging, and other situations in which support (or information activity and behavioral intentions) are the focus.

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