

# Comparative Effects of Organization–Public Relationships and Product-related Attributes on Brand Attitude

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**ABSTRACT** *This study empirically investigates how the dimensions of organization–public relationships, i.e. trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction, are related to brand attitude formation. In order to establish a benchmark for analysis, it also compares the effects of organization–public relationships on brand attitude to those of product-related attribute beliefs. The results of a survey conducted using a branded laptop computer product showed that, while both organization–public relationships and product-related attributes were significantly related to attitude towards the brand, among the dimensions of organization–public relationships only ‘satisfaction’ was a significant predictor of brand attitude. In addition, the explanatory power of organization–public relationships was found to be weaker than that of product-related attribute beliefs in predicting brand attitudes.*

**KEY WORDS:** Organization–public relationships, brand attitude, brand equity, public relations management, public relations measurement

## **Introduction**

Many recent studies in public relations have approached relationship management as a public relations function, i.e. the management of relationships between an organization and its key publics (Ledingham and Bruning, 2000). Such a perspective shifts the goal of public relations away from the traditional manipulation of public opinion and puts emphasis on building, nurturing and maintaining organization–public relationships (Ehling, 1992). The change also means that public relations programmes will no longer be evaluated in terms of the communication of messages, but rather by determining the influence that organizational activities have on the perceptions of key publics of the organization–public relationship, as well as the

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impact that organizational activities have on the behaviours of key publics (Bruning and Ledingham, 2000). At the same time, brand management has become an essential function in building an organization's intangible equity in today's marketplace through its influence on customer preferences and the positive behavioural consequences (Keller, 1998).

Some scholars have begun to examine the linkage between public relations and the value of 'brands' in an organization. Ries and Ries (2002) asserted that public relations has quietly become the most powerful marketing discipline and that public relations, specifically publicity and the resulting word of mouth, is what builds new brands. Marken (2001) explained what public relations can and should do for a brand. Lafferty and Goldsmith (1999) discussed the significant effects of corporate credibility on customers' attitudes towards advertising, attitudes towards brands and purchase intentions. Goldsmith *et al.* (2000) also found that corporate credibility had the strongest impact on attitudes towards a brand. Nevertheless, little research has empirically investigated the impact of organization-public relationships on brand attitudes or purchase intentions. Similarly, brand studies have traditionally examined the predictors of brand attitudes or purchase intentions using factors such as product-related attributes or characteristics, advertising messages and other non-public relations marketing strategies.

This study will investigate how various dimensions of organization-public relationships are related to brand attitude formation and compare the effectiveness of organization-public relationships to that of product-related attributes in shaping brand attitudes.

## Literature Review

### *Measuring Organization-Public Relationships*

Based on interpersonal relationship principles, Ledingham and Bruning (1998) defined the organization-public relationship as the state that exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact on the economic, social, cultural or political well being of the other' (p. 62). Scholarship concerning the management of organization-public relationships has increased significantly in recent years. Huang (2001) found that organization-public relationships were key mediating variables in the effect of an organization's public relations strategies on resolving the conflicts between the organization and its publics.

In terms of the measurement of these important variables, Grunig *et al.* (1992, p. 136) suggested that the quality of organization-public relationships might be measured through the dimensions of reciprocity, trust, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction and mutual understanding. On the same note, Ledingham *et al.* (1997) conducted a multidiscipline review of the relationship literature and identified 17 dimensions that scholars have held to be central to interpersonal relationships, marketing relationships and other relationships. Those dimensions were the following: investment, commitment, trust, comfort with relational dialectics, cooperation, mutual goals, interdependence/power imbalance, performance satisfaction, comparison level of the alternatives, adaptation, non-retrievable investment, shared technology, summative constructs, structural bonds, social bonds, intimacy and

passion. This initial list was later reduced to the five dimensions of trust, openness, involvement, commitment and investment (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998). In subsequent research, Bruning and Ledingham (1998) found that these five relationship dimensions did predict customer satisfaction in a competitive environment. In a later study Bruning and Ledingham (1999) again grouped together indicators of relationship quality that had been suggested by other scholars into interpersonal, professional and community relationships for measuring the quality of organization–public relationships. In a further study Grunig and Huang (2000) suggested trust, control mutuality, relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction as the most important outcome factors in an organization–public relationship. Most recently, when factor analysing all available items from the interpersonal, relationship marketing and public relations literature, Kim (2001) developed a four-dimension scale (trust, commitment, local or community involvement and reputation) with 16 items for measuring organization–public relationships.

Conceptualizations of relationship management and organization–public relationships in the public relations literature mirror concepts from the marketing literature. Hutton (1999) noted that, while there are substantial differences between marketing and public relations, there are also many characteristics that these professions have in common, such as communication, persuasion and relationships. From a marketing perspective, relationship quality might be considered as an overall assessment of the strength of that relationship (Smith, 1998; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999). Although there are still disagreements about what dimensions make up relationship quality, marketing scholars thus far have emphasized the importance of relationship satisfaction, trust and commitment as valid indicators of relationship quality (De Wulf *et al.*, 2001).

Based on previous literature on the measurement of relationships, the present study adopted trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction as the dimensions on which to measure organization–public relationships. Literature concerning the characteristics of these four dimensions is presented next.

*Trust.* Trust is widely accepted as an important component of interpersonal, organizational and organization–public relationships (Grunig and Huang, 2000) and is generally viewed as an essential element for successful relationships (Moorman *et al.*, 1993; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Berry, 1995). From a marketing perspective, Moorman *et al.* (1993) defined trust as ‘a willingness to rely on an exchange partner in whom one has confidence’ (p. 82). Moorman *et al.* (1993) asserted that confidence and trustworthiness result from the ability to perform (expertise), reliability and intentionality. According to Morgan and Hunt (1994), trust represents the perception of ‘confidence in the exchange partner’s reliability and integrity’ (p. 23). Both definitions highlight the importance of confidence and reliability in the conception of trust.

Trust, however, is a multidimensional concept (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Its secondary components are integrity, dependability and competence. If an organization has integrity, then publics believe that it is fair in its interactions. Dependability means that publics can rely on the organization to do what it says. Competence means that the organization has the resources and ability to follow through with its

commitments (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Putting all this together, De Wulf *et al.* (2001) defined trust in marketing as a consumer's confidence in an organization's reliability and integrity.

*Control mutuality.* Hon and Grunig (1999) defined control mutuality as 'the degree to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence one another' (p. 13). Grunig and Huang (2000) stated that some imbalance of power is inevitable in many relationships and that control mutuality takes this asymmetry into account. However, if one party attempts to have sole control over the relationship, the other outcome factors, namely trust, satisfaction and commitment, will suffer (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Therefore, it is beneficial for parties to agree on the level of control mutuality in a relationship.

*Commitment.* Commitment examines the degree to which 'one party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote' (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 14). It is often examined as an effective indicator of internal relationships in an organizational setting. For example, commitment has been associated closely with increased organizational citizenship, recruiting and training practices and organizational support (Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Berry and Parasuraman (1991) held that, in service relationships, relationships are built on the foundation of mutual commitment.

From the perspective of relationship marketing, Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined relationship commitment as an exchange partner. If the committed party believes the relationship is worth promoting then they will put forth maximum effort in order to maintain the relationship. Morgan and Hunt (1994) also viewed brand loyalty as a form of commitment and concluded that commitment is vital to the relationship of the organization and its' various partners.

*Satisfaction.* Having satisfaction means that the organization and its publics feel positive towards each other. Hon and Grunig (1999) defined relationship satisfaction as 'the extent to which one party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced' (p. 14). De Wulf *et al.* (2001) defined relationship satisfaction as a consumer's affective state resulting from an overall evaluation of his or her relationship with an organization. Stafford and Canary (1991) held that, from a social exchange perspective, a satisfying relationship is one in which 'the distribution of rewards is equitable and the relational rewards outweigh costs' (p. 225). Stafford and Canary (1991) also indicated that perceptions of partners' constructive maintenance behaviours increase one's satisfaction with the relationship and they thus concluded that relational satisfaction is probably the hallmark of effective relational maintenance.

#### *Marketing Contribution of Organization–Public Relationships*

So how do effective organization–public relationships contribute to an organization's marketing programmes? Brown and Dacin (1997) noted that, when a consumer identifies a product with a company, her or his overall evaluation of the company is likely to influence the evaluation of the product. Several studies have

found that corporate image or credibility positively affects consumer product perceptions and responses (Belch and Belch, 1987; Wansink, 1989; Keller and Aaker, 1992, 1994). Nevertheless, most empirical studies of corporate associations focus on creating measures of various constructs, such as corporate image, rather than on developing theoretical links to other important constructs, such as consumer responses. Hon (1998) called for research to explore the causal relationships between public relations activities and specific outcomes. Later, Ledingham and Bruning (2000) showed that, when an organization engages in actions and communications that promote a sense of openness, trust, commitment, involvement and investment, it builds symbolic and behavioural relationships with its key publics. In fact, Ledingham and Bruning's (2000) study showed that, when a managed communication programme centred on the relationship dimensions was implemented, there was a 10% increase in the number of customers who said they would stay with their current local telephone service provider.

Empirical results such as these point to the potential contribution of organization–public relationships to organizations' brand building efforts. In order to establish the theoretical linkage between organization–public relationships and brand attitudes, literature concerning the constructs of brand attitude is presented next.

### *Brand Attitude*

Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) defined brand attitude as a predisposition to respond in a consistently favourable or unfavourable manner towards a particular brand. Wilkie (1990) regarded brand attitudes as consumers' overall evaluations of a brand, which often form the basis for consumer behaviours, such as brand choice. Attitude towards the advertisement, attitude towards the brand and purchase intention represent the main outcome variables in many studies of advertising effectiveness (Kalwani and Silk, 1982; MacKenzie and Lutz, 1989; Heath and Gaeth, 1994). For example, Bruner and Hensel (1996) reported 66 published studies that measured brand attitude, typically as the dependent variable in research on product line extensions or advertising effects. While substantial effort has been devoted to measuring attitude towards the brand and purchase intention as the effect of attitude towards advertising, no empirical research has looked at the effect of organization–public relationships on brand attitudes.

Nevertheless, the conceptual linkage between an organization's brand and its organization–public relationships can be easily referred. According to Olins (2000),

Brands are the device we use to differentiate between otherwise almost indistinguishable competitors. Without clear branding, in some fields, we literally could not tell one product or service from another (p. 61).

Olins (2000) also suggested that people can have a relationship with a brand: 'they have an immense emotional content and inspire loyalty beyond reason' (p. 63). Olins's (2000) discussion suggested that brands could consist of the following three factors.

1. The behaviour of an organization, which is often defined as a component of organizational identity.
2. Communications/Messages for defining differentiating attributes of an organization or product.
3. Relationships with an organization as people conceptualize that organization (Van Riel, 1995).

Furthermore, Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) research showed that consumers who ranked the organization high with regard to the dimensions of trust, openness, involvement, commitment and investment said they would stay with that company in the face of competition from other brands.

From a different perspective, a brand offers something in addition to a product's functional purpose. According to Kotler (1980), a product is defined as anything that can be offered to a market for attention, acquisition, use or consumption that may satisfy a need or want. A brand is a product, but one that adds other dimensions to differentiate it in some way from other products designed to satisfy the same need (Keller, 1998). Achenbaum (1993) further suggested that what distinguishes a brand from its unbranded commodity counterpart is the sum of consumers' perceptions and feelings (1) about the product's attributes and how it performs, (2) about the brand name and what it stands for and (3) about the company associated with the brand. In other words, because a brand offers more than a product, it can be viewed as a product that provides functional benefits plus added values that consumers value enough to buy (Jones, 1986). Organization–Public relationships can lead consumers to have a positive brand attitude and purchase the brand by associating these added values with the product itself.

In order to build a successful relationship, it is necessary to demonstrate the value of relationship building to outcomes that contribute to the organizational goals. In contrast to business in the past, today's marketplace puts an even higher value on intangible assets.

In essence, as one seeks to measure the overall impact or effectiveness of a particular public relations programme or activity, individuals' opinions, attitudes and preferences become extremely important measures of possible outcomes. Lindenmann (2002) asserted that attitude research not only measures what people say about something, but also what they know and think, what they feel and how they are inclined to act. Given the importance of attitude research in measuring public relations outcomes, organization–public relationships can be used for predicting consumers' attitudes towards the brand.

Based on the existing literature, which implies potentially favourable relationships between the four dimensions of organization–public relationships and brand attitudes, the following hypothesis is investigated.

- H<sub>1</sub>: The four dimensions of organization–public relationships, i.e. trust, control mutuality, satisfaction and commitment, will be positively related to brand attitudes.

*Product-related Attribute Beliefs*

In order to provide a benchmark for comparison, this study will also introduce product-related attribute beliefs, typically the most direct contributors to the formation of brand attitudes and examine the effect these beliefs have on brand attitudes.

Keller (1998) asserted that brand associations could be classified into three major categories: attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes are those descriptive features that characterize a product or service, what consumers think the product or service is or has and what is involved with its purchase or consumption. Attributes can be product related and non-product related such as price, user and usage imagery and brand personality. According to Keller (1998), product-related attributes are ‘the ingredients necessary for performing the product or service function sought by consumers’ (p.93). Product-related attributes refer to a product’s physical composition or a service’s requirements and are what determine the nature and level of product performance (Keller, 1998). Product-related attributes can be further characterized according to important and optional features, either necessary for a product to work or for allowing customization and more versatile personalized usage (Keller, 1998). On the other hand, non-product-related attributes can be characterized as external aspects of the product or service that often relate to its purchase or consumption in some way. Non-product-related attributes might affect the purchase or consumption procedure, but do not directly influence the product performance (Keller, 1998). Compared to product-related attributes, the present study assumes that organization–public relationships can be classified as kinds of non-product-related attributes that influence brand attitudes and eventually purchase intentions via the brand attitude.

In order to measure the impact of product-related attribute beliefs on the formation of brand attitudes, it is necessary to evaluate the relationship between attributes and brand attitudes. The measurement of brand attitudes is a complex issue as an attitude is an intricate set of cognitive, affective and behavioural processes between an attitude object and a consumer. Though several different models of attitude have been proposed, the most widely accepted approach to modelling attitudes is a multi-attribute conceptualization in which attitudes are a function of the associated attributes and benefits that are salient for the attitude object itself.

Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) created the expectancy value approach as a general framework for understanding attitudes. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) proposed that attitudes are a function of the following.

1. Beliefs about the attitude object (cognitive-based nature), defined as the subjective probability that the attitude object has each attribute.
2. The evaluative aspect of these beliefs, defined as the evaluation of each attribute (affect-based nature).

Fishbein (1963) and Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) focused on beliefs as causes of attitudes and thereby assumed that attitudes derive from beliefs about attitude objects. As applied to marketing or advertising, this expectancy value model sees brand attitudes as a multiplicative function of the salient beliefs that a consumer has about the brand and the evaluation of those beliefs (Keller, 1998).

Given the increasing claims of organization–public relationships' positive contributions to marketing and brand management goals (Lafferty and Goldsmith, 1999; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2000; Ries and Ries, 2002) and the growing importance of building brand equity via both product-related and non-product-related attributes (Keller, 1998), a comparison between the effects of the lesser known organization–public relationships and the more established product-related attribute beliefs on brand attitude will be the first step to validating the value of organization–public relationships.

Accordingly, in order to compare the effects of the organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs on brand attitudes as corporate associations and consumer product associations, the following hypothesis is investigated.

- H<sub>2</sub>: There is a significant difference between organization–public relations and product-related attribute beliefs regarding their impacts on brand attitudes.

### *Purchase Intention*

Typically, the value of brand attitude rests on its ability to influence a consumer's behaviour, directing him/her towards an activity that is beneficial to the organization such as making a purchase. In order to validate the value of brand attitude in the context of this study, the variable of purchase intention will also be investigated.

Purchase intention is the consumers' tendency to act towards an object and is generally measured in terms of intention to buy. In the absence of actual buying behaviour, management uses this closest substitute to determine the effectiveness of the components in a marketing mix. Most studies have found that there are inter-relationships between brand and advertisement cognitions and purchase intention (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986) and that the affective and cognitive-based attitudes towards the brand have a direct effect on purchase intentions (Homer and Yoon, 1992).

In order for any communication-based concepts to exist, it has been shown that there are multiple related theories and conceptualizations of the relationships between attitude towards the brand and, most specifically, purchase intention. From a public relations perspective, the organization–public relationships may provide the opportunity for attitudinal development through influencing intention to buy. To validate the relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention the following was hypothesized.

- H<sub>3</sub>: Attitude towards a brand will be positively related to the purchase intention of that branded product.

### **Research Method**

To assess the different aspects of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs, this study selected 'Sony' and its brand of personal

computers, VAIO, as the product of focus. Sony has acquired a strong brand equity, particularly related to its electronic appliances such as television sets, camcorders and the portable cassette player Walkman. Because the subjects of this empirical study were students, the product of personal computer was chosen as it is very relevant to students, has specific product-related attributes and requires cognitive efforts in the purchasing process (Lee *et al.*, 2001).

Like most studies on organization–public relationships that used surveys for measuring relationships between an organization and publics, this study employed an intercept survey of students. The survey methodology was chosen for developing a measure of the perceptions that publics have of their relationships with an organization and to enable statistical analysis of the data.

A convenience sample of 233 students in a south-eastern US university participated in a two-day intercept survey that took place in a public area and forum on the university campus.

Questionnaires from people who already had Sony VAIO computers, had never purchased Sony's products before or answered 'not familiar at all' to either question of familiarity with the company Sony or with Sony's products in general were excluded from the analysis. As a result, the final sample contained 178 valid cases.

### *Pre-tests*

Before conducting the actual survey, two different pre-tests were conducted. This preliminary step is necessary in order to uncover item ambiguities and other sources of bias and error (Garson, 2003). The first pre-test was conducted in order to determine the salient attributes of Sony VAIO computers that could measure product-related attribute beliefs. A convenience sample of 30 students in the same university participated in this pre-test. The salient attributes of Sony computers were determined by a free-elicitation technique as recommended by Ajzen and Fishbein (1980). Specifically, in order to elicit salient attributes the respondents in the pre-test were given a few minutes to list their thoughts in response to the following question: 'In thinking about buying a laptop computer, what characteristics are important to you?' Clearly, the perceived consequences of buying a Sony VAIO laptop computer may be very different from those of buying a laptop computer in general. As the present study assumed that VAIO was not a well-known brand among all college students, the respondents were asked to write down the attributes important to them if they were buying any laptop computer instead of a Sony VAIO laptop computer.

Better quality of components (28.72%), such as a CD-ROM and DVD drive, was regarded as the most important attribute when they considered buying a laptop computer, followed closely by longer/better warranty including technical service (23.40%). Other attributes mentioned by the respondents were more portable (20.21%), better customer service not including technical service (10.64%) and nicer looking design/appearance (9.57). Attributes such as customization, bundled software, an operating platform and others (7.45%) were grouped in a separate category. When selecting the five most mentioned important attributes, brand reputation and price were excluded from the salient attribute list because they are non-product-related attributes.

The second pre-test was conducted with another convenience sample of 37 students in order to determine whether college students were qualified as consumers who have established relationships with Sony and to help identify whether there were any problems with the survey instrument or survey instructions. The pre-test showed that over 95% of the respondents were familiar with the brand and the Sony products in general. Only one student had never purchased a Sony product.

The degree of familiarity served as the prerequisite that college students are likely to have had relationships with Sony.

### *Measures*

*Organization–Public relationships.* The present study adopted a survey instrument developed by Grunig and Huang (1999) with a high tested reliability for measuring organization–public relationships. According to their study, the organization–public relationship dimensions of trust, control mutuality, relationship commitment and relationship satisfaction were the most important outcome factors in organization–public relationships because they appear consistently in both the organizational and interpersonal communication literature (Grunig and Huang, 2000). The same researchers (Grunig and Huang, 1999) also suggested that the number of instrument items chosen depends upon a researcher's needs, but a shorter index is likely to increase the completion rate. Accordingly, this study used the scales comprised of the four relationship indicators and were all measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

*Trust.* The present study adopted Hon and Grunig's (1999) definition of trust as 'one party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party' (p. 14). The respondents were asked to indicate the degree of trust they had in Sony on six seven-point scale items (see Table 1).

*Control mutuality.* This study adopted the definition of control mutuality as 'the degree to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence one another' (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 13). Four items were used for measuring control mutuality. Note that one item was reversed from the original wording so as to avoid confusing the respondents, as suggested by the pre-test results.

*Commitment.* Adopting Hon and Grunig's (1999) definition of commitment as 'the extent to which one party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote' (p. 14), this study used a four-item scale for measuring the commitment of the public to the organization.

*Satisfaction.* Based on Hon and Grunig's (1999) definition of satisfaction as 'the extent to which one party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationships are reinforced' (p. 14), this study used the same four-item sub-scale for measuring satisfaction.

*Product-related attribute beliefs.* In order to measure product-related attribute beliefs, this study adopted Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) expectancy value model as a

**Table 1.** Items used for measuring organization–public relationships, product-related attribute beliefs, brand attitude and purchase intention

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Trust (six-item scale)
Sony treats me fairly and justly as a customer
Whenever Sony makes an important decision, I know they will be concerned about me as a customer
Sony can be relied on to keep its promises to me as a customer
I believe that Sony takes my opinions into account as a customer when making decisions
I feel very confident about Sony’s skills
Sony has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do
Control mutuality (four-item scale)
Sony and I pay attention to what each other communicates
Sony believes my opinions as a customer are legitimate
In dealing with customers like me, Sony does not have a tendency to throw its weight around
Sony really listens to what I have to say as a customer
Commitment (four-item scale)
I feel that Sony is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me as a customer
Sony wants to maintain a relationship with me as a customer
There is a long-term bond between Sony and me as a customer
Compared to other companies, I value my relationship with Sony more
Satisfaction (four-item scale)
I am happy with Sony
Both Sony and I benefit from our relationship
I am happy with my interactions with Sony
Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship Sony has established with me
Beliefs about the salient attributes
Longer/Better warranty (including technical service)
Better customer service (not including technical service)
Nicer looking design/appearance
Better quality of components (e.g. a CD-ROM and DVD drive)
More portable
Importance of the salient attributes
Longer/Better warranty (including technical service)
Better customer service (not including technical service)
Nicer looking design/appearance
Better quality of components (e.g. a CD-ROM and DVD drive)
More portable
Attitude towards the brand (four-item scale)
Unfavourable/Favourable
Bad/Good
Dislike/Like
Negative/Positive
Purchase intention (three-item scale)
Unlikely/Likely
Impossible/Possible
Improbable/Probable

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tool for predicting brand attitude from subjects’ attributes and beliefs. According to Fishbein and Ajzen’s (1975) expectancy value model, beliefs as causes of attitudes are a function of the following.

1. Beliefs about the attitude object, defined as the subjective probability that the attitude object has each attribute.
2. The evaluative aspect of these beliefs, defined as the evaluation of each attribute (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975).

Expectancy value formulation is expressed algebraically as follows:

$$A_o = \sum_{i=1}^n b_i e_i,$$

where  $A_o$  is the attitude towards the object, action or event  $o$ ,  $b_i$  is the belief  $i$  about  $o$  (expressed as the subjective probability that  $o$  has the attribute  $i$ ),  $e_i$  is the evaluation of the attribute  $i$  and  $n$  is the number of salient attributes (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993).

For example, if a person believes that a new car is visually appealing but lacks safety features, these attributes will be represented by the subjective evaluation that the car has those attributes (i.e. high probability of visual appeal and low probability of safety features), as well as by the evaluation of each attribute (i.e. the positive evaluation of visual appeal and safety features). In this example, a person may rate the above attributes as follows: 5 for visual appeal and 3 for safety features on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). In addition, the person may evaluate the above attributes as follows: 2 for visual appeal and 6 for safety features on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (extremely bad) to 7 (extremely good). Thus, the person's attitude towards the car can be predicted by multiplying his or her evaluation of each of the attributes by the strength of his or her belief (i.e.  $5 \times 2 = 10$  and  $3 \times 6 = 18$ ) and then summing all the salient beliefs for the total set of beliefs ( $10 + 18 = 28$ ). In conclusion, it can be said that the person's attitude towards the car is predicted to be slightly positive (in this example, 2 would be the lowest possible score and 98 would be the highest).

However, unlike Fishbein's (1963) evaluative component of the expectancy value model, in this study the attribute evaluation was measured in terms of importance borrowed from Galloway and Meek's (1981) research. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) found that the addition of the importance factor in the expectancy value model did not improve but sometimes even attenuated the prediction of attitudes. That may be partially due to the closeness of salient belief items included in the expectancy value model and important belief items (Cai, 2001). The present study measures laptop-related attributes, which will vary by user preference and purpose of usage. Hence, some attributes may be salient to certain users, but not at all to others. Therefore, the importance factor can be more valuable than the good/bad factor in predicting brand attitude in the present study.

Accordingly, product-related attribute beliefs were measured by asking the respondents how likely was it that they would have certain attributes in a Sony VAIO laptop computer on a seven-point measurement scale ranged from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). The importance of the attributes was measured by asking the respondents to evaluate each of them. While Fishbein's (1963) evaluation scale ranges from  $-4$  (bad) to  $4$  (good), the present study used an importance scale ranging from 1 (extremely unimportant) to 7 (extremely important) for consistency purposes. Finally, in order to predict brand attitude, product-related

attribute beliefs were multiplied by the importance of each of the salient attributes and these values were summed.

*Brand attitude.* The most frequently used multi-dimensional scale (unfavourable/favourable, bad/good, dislike/like and negative/positive) was adopted for measuring brand attitude. In this study, brand attitude was measured by four-items using a seven-point scale. The scales have been proven to exhibit extremely high internal consistency (Woo, 2001).

*Purchase intention.* With regard to purchase intention, a three-item scale (unlikely/likely, impossible/possible and improbable/probable) was adapted from Mackenzie *et al.* (1986).

### *Data Analysis*

Statistical procedures such as Pearson's correlations, multiple regression analysis and path analysis were used in this study. Pearson's correlations were performed before conducting multiple regression analysis in order to assess any significant relationships between the variables in the study. Multiple regression analysis was used for measuring the effect of each indicator of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs on attitude towards the brand and on the relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention. Finally, this study measured the causal relationships between (1) each indicator of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs and (2) purchase intention via brand attitude using path analysis, which is an extension of the regression model often used for testing the fit of the correlation matrix against two or more causal models that are being compared by the researcher (Garson, 2003).

## **Results and Discussion**

Of the total number of 178 respondents, 95 (53.4%) were males and 83 (46.6%) were females. Most of them were undergraduate students (81.5%) with over 50% of them at the class standing of juniors or higher. The respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 40 years with a mean age of 21.76 years.

### *Relationship Assessment: Familiarity*

In the survey the respondents were asked how familiar they were with the company Sony, Sony's products in general and Sony VAIO desktop or laptop computers. To make sure that they were customers of and had established relationships with Sony, the respondents should be at least somewhat familiar with the company and its products.

The results showed that the students in the sample qualified as a group of consumers with an existing relationship with Sony, as 46 students (25.8%) were somewhat familiar, 66 students (37.1%) were familiar and 66 students (37.1%) were very familiar with the company Sony. When it came to familiarity with Sony products in general, 53 students (29.8%) were somewhat familiar, 80 students

(44.9%) were familiar and 45 students (25.3%) were very familiar. The respondents were also asked whether they had purchased Sony products before in order to determine whether they were customers of Sony. All of the respondents had purchased Sony products before. In terms of computer ownership, 149 students (83.7%) had computers. Since no respondent in the sample had a Sony VAIO computer, the present study assumed that the respondents did not have prior attitudes towards Sony VAIO laptop computers.

In addition, in order to assess the reliability of the organization–public relationship items, Cronbach's  $\alpha$ -value was computed for the items comprised of each organization–public relationship dimension. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$ -value of the organization–public relationship scales ranged satisfactorily between 0.87 and 0.93, which was slightly higher than those of the reliability coefficients found in Grunig and Huang's (1999) original study.

In order to test the validity of the organization–public relationship dimensions, an exploratory factor analysis without any constraint was conducted using principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation. Three factors were yielded with eigenvalues of 1.00 or higher, explaining 72.49% of the variance. In response to this unexpected result, another exploratory factor analysis designating four factors was conducted using principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation (see Table 2).

The new factor loadings for organization–public relationships explained 76.7% of the total variance. In social sciences, it is common to consider a solution that accounts for 60% of the total variance (and in some instances even less) as satisfactory (Hair *et al.*, 1998). The eigenvalues for factors 1–4 were 4.46, 4.09, 2.88 and 2.38, respectively. The percentage of the variance explained for factor 1 was 24.76%, that for factor 2 was 22.73%, that for factor 3 was 15.97% and that for factor 4 was 13.23%. The first factor clearly represented control mutuality. The second factor represented satisfaction. Although the third and fourth factors did not represent the complete items of trust and commitment, both factors included half of the items of trust and commitment, respectively and yielded relatively high loadings for other relevant questions. Overall, while there might be some underlying convergent validity concerns for the organization–public relationship dimensions of trust on control mutuality and commitment on satisfaction, the general organization–public relationships dimensions can be considered valid.

#### *Relationship Between Organization–Public Relationships and Brand Attitude*

The first hypothesis investigated the relation between the four dimensions of organization–public relationships and attitude towards the brand. In order to test the hypothesis, Pearson's correlation analysis and multiple regression analysis were performed. Pearson's correlation coefficients showed that all dimensions of organization–public relationships were significantly correlated with brand attitude, with the resulting Pearson's  $r$ -values ranging from 0.25 to 0.78 (see Table 3).

In order to test the significance of individual dimensions of organization–public relationships as predictors of brand attitude, multiple regression analysis was performed next. The results showed that, in terms of a total model fit ( $F$ -test), organization–public relationships were significantly related to brand attitude

**Table 2.** Factor analysis of organization–public relationships with designation of four factors

Variables	Factor loadings			
	1	2	3	4
Trust (six-item scale)				
Sony treats me fairly and justly as a customer	0.529	0.220	0.565	0.129
Whenever Sony makes an important decision I know they will be concerned about me as a customer	0.778	0.306	0.279	−0.003
Sony can be relied on to keep its promises to me as a customer	0.596	0.270	0.569	0.073
I believe that Sony takes my opinions into account as a customer when making decisions	0.657	0.055	0.426	0.298
I feel very confident about Sony’s skills	0.155	0.326	0.799	0.224
Sony has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do	0.243	0.260	0.780	0.207
Control mutuality (four-item scale)				
Sony and I pay attention to what each other communicates	0.643	0.456	0.113	0.209
Sony believes my opinions as a customer are legitimate	0.689	0.172	0.274	0.460
In dealing with customers like me, Sony does not have a tendency to throw its weight around	0.716	0.326	0.112	0.135
Sony really listens to what I have to say as a customer	0.671	0.294	0.127	0.472
Commitment (four-item scale)				
I feel that Sony is trying to maintain a long-term commitment with me as a customer	0.322	0.401	0.213	0.707
Sony wants to maintain a relationship with me as a customer	0.126	0.385	0.242	0.798
There is a long-term bond between Sony and me as a customer	0.446	0.520	0.255	0.452
Compared to other companies, I value my relationship with Sony more	0.476	0.562	0.254	0.293
Satisfaction (four-item scale)				
I am happy with Sony	0.216	0.735	0.451	0.226
Both Sony and I benefit from our relationship	0.246	0.786	0.160	0.299
I am happy with my interactions with Sony	0.267	0.794	0.273	0.234
Generally speaking, I am pleased with the relationship Sony has established with me	0.358	0.765	0.273	0.244
Eigenvalue	4.460	4.090	2.880	2.380
Percentage of the total variance explained <sup>a</sup>	24.760	22.730	15.970	13.230

<sup>a</sup>Total percentage=76.7%.

**Table 3.** Correlations of the organization–public relationships dimensions and brand attitude

	Trust	Control mutuality	Commitment	Satisfaction	Brand attitude
Trust	1.00	–	–	–	–
Control mutuality	0.775**	1.00	–	–	–
Commitment	0.731**	0.784**	1.00	–	–
Satisfaction	0.706**	0.709**	0.803**	1.00	–
Brand attitude	0.251**	0.302**	0.300**	0.367**	1.00

\*\* $p < 0.01$  (two-tailed).

( $F=6.274$  and  $p < 0.001$ ), with 13.6% of the variance in brand attitude explained statistically by the four dimensions of organization–public relationships (see regression 1 in Table 4). However, of all four dimensions of organization–public relationships, only satisfaction was a significant predictor of attitude towards the brand ( $\beta=0.358$  and  $p < 0.05$ ). One statistical explanation of the results might be that the four dimensions of organization–public relationships are closely related to one another and, therefore, one single dimension (except for satisfaction) could not have a significant effect on a dependent variable. This explanation is supported by the fact that, while the four dimensions were highly correlated with one another in terms of Pearson correlations, the ‘partial correlations’ between trust, control mutuality and commitment and attitude towards the brand changed significantly except for satisfaction.

The findings imply that the one dimension of organization–public relationships that needs to be emphasized is satisfaction. Indeed, relational satisfaction has long been acknowledged as an important aspect of the relationship quality (Millar and Rogers, 1976; Ferguson, 1984; Stafford and Canary, 1991). According to Ferguson (1984), the degree to which both the organization and the public are satisfied with their relationship is a significant indicator of the quality of the relationship. In addition, from a social exchange perspective, Stafford and Canary (1991) stated that one partner’s satisfaction with the relationship increases with the perception that the other partner is working effectively towards the maintenance of that relationship. Bruning and Ledingham (1998) argued that the organization–public relationship is closely related to consumer satisfaction and the level of satisfaction is influenced by the relationship quality.

#### *Comparison Between the Impact of Organization–Public Relationships and Product-related Attribute Beliefs on Brand Attitude*

Hypothesis 2 addressed the relative explanatory power of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs on brand attitude. In order to measure the latter independent variable, this study constructed an overall measure of product-related attribute beliefs using the expectancy value model (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). The composite product-related attribute beliefs correlated significantly with attitude towards the brand ( $r=0.402$  and  $p < 0.001$ ). Multiple

**Table 4.** Multiple regressions of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs on brand attitude

Variables	Regression coefficients					Correlations	
	Unstandardized		Standardized $\beta$	$t$	Significance	Zero-order	Partial
	$B$	SE					
Regression 1 <sup>a</sup>							
Trust	-0.129	0.152	-0.108	-0.849	0.397	0.239	-0.067
Control mutuality	0.166	0.144	0.160	1.158	0.248	0.297	0.091
Commitment	-4.072E-02	0.125	-0.047	-0.327	0.744	0.289	-0.026
Satisfaction	0.347	0.129	0.358	2.702	0.008	0.358	0.210
Regression 2 <sup>b</sup>							
Product-related attribute beliefs	1.029E-02	0.002	0.402	5.741	0.000	-	-
Regression 3 <sup>c</sup>							
Trust	-0.144	0.147	-0.120	-0.980	0.329	-	-
Control mutuality	8.531E-02	0.140	0.082	0.608	0.544	-	-
Commitment	-2.337E-02	0.120	-0.027	-0.194	0.846	-	-
Satisfaction	0.267	0.126	0.275*	2.118	0.036	-	-
Product-related attribute beliefs	7.297E-03	0.002	0.295**	3.637	0.000	-	-

<sup>a</sup> $R^2=0.136$ , adjusted  $R^2=0.115$  and  $F$ -ratio=6.274 ( $p<0.001$ ).

<sup>b</sup> $R^2=0.162$ , adjusted  $R^2=0.157$  and  $F$ -ratio=32.960 ( $p<0.001$ ).

<sup>c</sup> $R^2=0.203$ , adjusted  $R^2=0.178$  and  $F$ -ratio=8.050 ( $p<0.001$ ).

\* $p<0.05$ , \*\* $p<0.01$ .

regression of product-related attribute beliefs statistically explained 16.2% of the variance in attitude towards the brand (see regression 2 in Table 4).

In order to examine the relative importance of all possible independent variables for predicting brand attitude, a multiple regression of attitude towards the brand including all independent variables was conducted (see regression 3 in Table 4). The results show that this equation was significant ( $F=8.050$  and  $p<0.001$ ), with 20.3% of the variance in attitude towards the brand explained statistically by the dimensions of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs. Of all independent variables, only satisfaction ( $\beta=0.275$  and  $p<0.05$ ) and product-related attribute beliefs ( $\beta=0.295$  and  $p<0.001$ ) significantly predicted attitude towards the brand.

In order to compare the predictive power of two different sets of independent variables on attitude towards the brand, a hierarchical regression analysis was performed next. In the first regression model, which represents a test of the variance in brand attitude explained by organization–public relationships, product-related attribute beliefs were entered in step 1 of the analysis (model 1a), and the dimensions of organization–public relationships were entered in step 2 (model 2a). As indicated in Table 5, product-related attribute beliefs explained 15.7% of variance in attitude towards the brand ( $\beta=0.396$  and  $p<0.001$ ). When the dimensions of organization–public relationships were entered in step 2 of the analysis, an additional 4.6% of the variance was explained. However, the increase in  $R^2$  by adding the dimensions of organization–public relationships in step 2 was not statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

In a second hierarchical analysis, the dimensions of organization–public relationships were entered in step 1 of the regression analysis (model 1b) and product-related attribute beliefs were entered in step 2 in order to check for the predictive power of product-related attribute beliefs on brand attitude (model 2b). After step 1 of the regression analysis, the dimensions of organization–public relationships explained 13.6% of the variance in attitude towards the brand. Step 2 of the regression analysis produced an increase in the variance of 6.7% showing a significance of association with attitude towards the brand at the 0.01 level. It appears that beliefs about product-related attributes are a better predictor of attitude towards the brand than the dimensions of organization–public relationships.

**Table 5.** Hierarchical regression analysis comparing the predictive power of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs on brand attitude

Model	$R^2$	$R^2$ change	$F$ change	Significance of $F$
1a	0.157	0.157	30.075	0.000
2a	0.203	0.046	2.302	0.061
1b	0.136	0.136	6.274	0.000
2b	0.203	0.067	13.226	0.000

Independent variables: model 1a, product-related attribute beliefs; model 2a, product-related attribute beliefs and organization–public relationships; model 1b, organization–public relationships; model 2b, organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs.

It is important to note that the relative power of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs might be product dependent. Keller (1998) defined that product-related attributes as ‘the ingredients necessary for performing the product or service function sought by consumers’ (p.93). Thus, it appears that customers are likely to evaluate the brand based on the product’s physical composition and functional attributes, which in turn determine the level of product performance. However, considering that the present study used laptop computers, which have many functional-based attributes, as the product of focus, the participants’ overall evaluation of the brand may be less influenced by their relationships with Sony, but rather by their product-related attribute beliefs. Research suggests that consumers can evaluate brands differently depending on the type of product analysed. For example, it is not easy to differentiate a brand of gasoline from another brand of the same product. However, if a certain oil company supports environmental causes, consumers are likely to hold positive attitudes towards that brand due to corporate social responsibility, rather than product-related attributes.

*Relationship Between Brand Attitude and Purchase Intention*

Pearson correlation analysis showed that brand attitude correlated strongly and significantly with purchase intention ( $r=0.510$  and  $p<0.001$ ). A regression analysis was conducted for the purchase intention predicted by attitude towards the brand. According to Table 6, 26.1% of the variance in purchase intention was explained by attitude towards the brand. This result is consistent with previous advertising research, as well as with the findings of the dual mediation hypothesis (MacKenzie *et al.*, 1986; Brown and Stayman, 1992) that looked at attitudinal–behavioural patterns and relationships in advertising.

*Causal Relationships Between Organization–Public Relationships, Product-related Attribute Beliefs, Brand Attitude and Purchase Intention: a Path Analysis*

In an attempt to explore the causal relationships between each dimension of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs and purchase intention via brand attitude, this study also employed the statistical tool of path analysis. Note that the present study does not assume that the four dimensions of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs have a direct

**Table 6.** Regression analysis of brand attitude on purchase intention (dependent variable)

Variable	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficient	t	Significance
	B	SE			
Attitude towards the brand	0.720	0.093	0.510	7.739	0.000

$R^2=0.261$ , adjusted  $R^2=0.256$  and  $F$ -ratio= $59.892$  ( $p<0.001$ ).

effect on purchase intention. Rather, it suggested that attitude towards the brand would be a mediating variable for predicting purchase intention. Therefore, path analysis was performed in order to measure the causal relationships between each dimension of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs and purchase intention via brand attitude.

As expected, the resulting statistics showed that all direct (not mediated by brand attitude) relationships between the five independent variables and purchase intention were statistically insignificant (see Table 7). Further path analysis confirmed that three paths, which were all direct paths, were statistically significant: from satisfaction to attitude towards the brand (0.275), from product-related attribute beliefs to brand attitude (0.295) and from brand attitude to purchase intention (0.428). Therefore, the final parsimonious model includes two independent variables, satisfaction and product-related attribute beliefs (see Fig. 1). In other words, this model posited that satisfaction and product-related attribute beliefs were determinants of brand attitude, which in turn influenced purchase intention.

### Summary and Conclusions

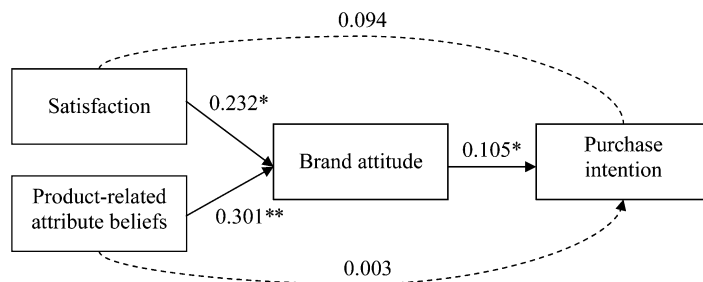
As public relations scholars have emphasized, demonstrating the value of organization–public relationships is of great significance given the importance of building a successful relationship between an organization and its publics (Ledingham and Bruning, 1998; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Lindenmann, 1999; Huang, 2001). While branding has become a necessary tool for attracting and keeping customers in today's highly competitive marketplace, it was also stressed as

**Table 7.** Multiple regressions for generating path coefficients

Dependent and independent variables	Regression coefficients			
	Unstandardized		Standardized	$R^2$
	<i>B</i>	SE		
<b>Brand attitude<sup>a</sup></b>				
Trust	−0.144	0.147	−0.120	0.203**
Control mutuality	8.531E-02	0.140	0.082	–
Commitment	−2.337E-02	0.120	−0.027	–
Satisfaction	0.267	0.126*	0.275	–
Product	7.297E-03	0.002**	0.295	–
<b>Purchase intention<sup>a</sup></b>				
Trust	−8.850E-03	0.202	−0.005	0.297**
Control mutuality	0.200	0.193	0.132	–
Commitment	9.690E-02	0.165	0.077	–
Satisfaction	−6.441E-02	0.175	−0.046	–
Product	3.277E-03	0.003	0.091	–
Brand attitude	0.620**	–	0.428	–

<sup>a</sup>Dependent variables.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .



**Figure 1.** Path diagram of the relationships between satisfaction, product-related attribute beliefs, brand attitude and purchase intention

an indicator of how customers feel about an organization, the relationship with it and the organization’s products (Marken, 2001). Ries and Ries (2002) even suggested that public relations can create new brands through publicity and the resulting word of mouth. Nevertheless, no previous research has examined the link between organization–public relationships and branding from a public relations perspective.

As such, the main objective of this study was to explore whether brand attitude can be explained by organization–public relationships and the comparative impact of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs. In addition, the present study tested whether organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs can affect purchase intention via brand attitude. As a theoretical framework, the relationship theory and the expectancy value model were used.

One important finding of this study is the empirical validation of the relationship between organization–public relationships and brand attitude. That is, the customer’s perception of their relationship with a company can influence his or her attitude towards the brand offered by that company. Even when customers are unfamiliar with the specific attributes of a product, they are likely to form an attitude towards that brand based upon their relationships with the company producing the brand. In particular, this study found that, of four dimensions of organization–public relationships, the perception of satisfaction with the company had a significant impact on attitude towards the brand.

The present study also showed the different degrees of explanatory power of two groups of independent variables. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted on the four dimensions of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs. The results revealed that product-related attributes beliefs predicted attitude towards the brand better than the set of organization–public relationship dimensions. As expected, this study confirmed that attitude towards the brand has a direct impact on purchase intention. Furthermore, the study confirmed that the satisfaction dimension of organization–public relationships and product-related attribute beliefs predicted brand attitude and, through the mediating variable of brand attitude, purchase intention.

Generally, this study supports the proposition that organization–public relationships can function as an important predictor of brand attitude. Two regression

analyses that first excluded the competing effects of product-related attribute beliefs and then included them both showed that organization–public relationships were significantly related to attitude towards the brand. In addition, considering the demonstrated direct relationship between brand attitude and purchase intention, this study concludes that organization–public relationships can indirectly influence purchase intention.

Given the limited studies available in attitudinal and behavioural research in public relations, this study contributes to the literature in explaining how customers' association with an organization affects their attitude towards the organization's brands.

The present study also contributes to the practice of public relations, particularly from a relationship management perspective. Relationship management provides a basis for evaluating the contribution of public relations to organizational goals. The findings of this study suggest that a good quality of relationships between an organization and its publics can benefit the formation of intangible assets such as strong brand equity and customer loyalty.

There were several limitations in this study. A first limitation is related to the sample used for collecting the data. The respondents in the present study were chosen conveniently using an intercept sampling method, thus limiting its generalizability. Secondly, the multi-collinearity among the dimensions of organization–public relationships presents a problem in the analysis and interpretation of the relative power of other organization–public relationships on brand attitude. For instance, the fact that the trust factor also loaded highly on control mutuality and commitment on satisfaction may point to the need for a more robust refined measurement approach to the dimensions of organization–public relationships, so that the convergent validity of each dimension can be secured. It is possible that satisfaction can be separated from the other dimensions of organization–public relationships because the effect of satisfaction by far outweighed the effects of the other three dimensions.

The multi-attribute attitude model derived from Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) expectancy value model might also need further investigation. More research is needed in order to validate the replacement of the evaluative component of the Fishbein (1963) model with the relative importance component of attributes. Future studies should attempt to clarify the relationship between the evaluative component and the relative importance component in order to legitimize their use in the process of predicting attitudes.

In addition, the present study did not consider the length of relationship between customers and an organization. Relationships take years to develop and generally they strengthen over time. However, the present study measured relationships at one time regardless of consumers' relationship history with the company. It is likely that the relative importance of trust, control mutuality, commitment and satisfaction in predicting brand attitude and purchase intention varies according to the length of the relationship. It could be assumed that the longer a relationship exists, the stronger the relative impact of the dimensions of organization–public relationships on brand attitude and purchase intention.

This study also used only one product category, a laptop computer, which has many functional-based attributes. A different product category with limited explicit

product-related attributes might lend a stronger predictive effect of organization–public relationships. In order to increase the applicability of the suggested model future research should consider diverse organizations, product categories and brands. Iacobucci and Ostrom (1996) suggested that consumers view their relationships with large Fortune 500 companies as distant and purely transactional, while relationships with smaller firms are seen as closer and more supportive. Therefore, it appears important to examine different perceptions of relationships with different types of organizations, such as profit, non-profit, small, large, etc. In order to explore different types of consumer–product relationships, future researchers could also replicate the present study using a variety of brands and product categories with different levels of consumer involvement.

Public relations literature suggests the importance of relationships, but the concept of relationship has yet to be agreed upon by scholars. Without a clear definition of the concept, researchers cannot derive valid and reliable measures that are useful for positing and testing public relations theory (Broom *et al.*, 2000). Thus, future research should work towards finding a common definition for relationships in public relations. In addition, because much of the current knowledge about relationships in public relations comes from interpersonal communication literature, future research should test whether relationships based on interpersonal communication can be extended to organizations.

In addition to attitude towards the brand, attitude towards the organization can be added to examine its interactions with organization–public relationships. As an outcome variable of organization–public relationships, attitude towards the organization can explain the effect of organization–public relationships. Kim (2003) found that organization–public relationships can affect attitude towards the brand through attitude towards the organization. Future researchers might want to investigate whether attitude towards the organization can be another mediating variable between organization–public relationships and purchase intention.

The present study examined only the four most important dimensions of Hon and Grunig's (1999) relationship measurement scale. Future researchers need to move forward and suggest new measurement models by combining other variables that might affect publics' attitudes and behaviours. Since the present study found a multicollinearity problem among the four dimensions of organization–public relationships that was not addressed in previous research, the scales of relationship measurement should be refined more robustly.

Finally, future researchers might want to investigate organization–public relationships as both independent and dependent variables, as well as mediating variables in building the theory of organization–public relationships. Huang (2001) demonstrated that relationships were key mediating variables of the effect of an organization's public relations strategies on solving conflicts between the organization and its publics. Future studies addressing the antecedents of organization–public relationships and outcomes would certainly contribute to relationship theory building.

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