Izvorni znanstveni rad
UDK: 005.1: 659.4
005.7: 659.4
30. III. 2026.
DOI 10.47960/2712-0457.2026.1.8.7

ZORAN TOMIĆ*

MEANING MANAGEMENT THEORY IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

ABSTRACT

This paper develops Meaning Management Theory in Public Relations (MMT-PR) as a middle-range theory. It explains public relations as an institutionalized organizational capability for coordinating interpretations amid interpretive plurality. In contemporary communication environments, there is digital fragmentation of publics, competing narratives, and accelerated circulation of meanings. Organizational actions no longer possess stable and predetermined meanings. Instead, meaning emerges through social interpretation processes.

MMT-PR sees public relations not as a technical communication function, but as an organizational mechanism of interpretive coordination. It links internal sensemaking with external sensegiving processes. The theory places organizational meaning, management capability, and the meaning manager at its core. The meaning manager is the key actor for coordinating interpretive processes between the organization and its publics. The theory specifies contextual conditions, core constructs, generative mechanisms, structural relationships, and empirically testable propositions.

The theory assumes that organizations with an institutionalized capability for meaning management engage in coherent, ethically inclusive interpretive practices. These practices increase the likelihood of interpretive stability. Interpretive stability serves as an intervening mechanism, strengthening legitimacy, trust, and reputational resilience. The theory also stresses that meaning management is not about controlling meaning. Instead, it is about responsibly managing the conditions for interpretation, with ethical inclusiveness as a prerequisite for sustainable legitimacy. This paper advances public relations theory by making interpretation central to organizational management and by refining the concept of the meaning manager into a comprehensive model of meaning management.

Keywords: meaning management theory; public relations; organizational meaning; meaning management; interpretive stability; meaning manager; organizational legitimacy; reputational resilience.

* University of Mostar, Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina; zoran.tomic@sum.ba

INTRODUCTION: FROM INFORMATION TO MEANING

In contemporary societies, the primary challenge of organizational communication is no longer a lack of information but interpretive instability. Organizational decisions, strategic restructuring, crisis responses, innovations, and public positioning generate multiple competing interpretations. These interpretations circulate among fragmented publics and are amplified or redistributed through digital platforms.

Under such conditions, organizational action lacks a single inherent meaning. Meaning emerges through processes of social interaction and interpretation. Consequently, the central problem is no longer the dissemination of messages but the coordination of interpretations.

Meaning Management Theory in Public Relations (MMT-PR) addresses this challenge. It is founded on the premise that public relations constitutes an institutionalized organizational capability aimed at coordinating, structuring, and stabilizing interpretations of organizational action under conditions of interpretive ambiguity and broader interpretive plurality.

MMT-PR is a middle-range theory. It defines its scope, core ideas, mechanisms, and testable propositions.

ONTOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

To elaborate, the theory is grounded in three fundamental assumptions.

Interpretive Ontology

Meaning is not inherent in events. Rather, it emerges through the relationship between organizational action and the interpretive frameworks employed by publics.

Constructivist Epistemology

Knowledge about an organization consists of relatively stabilized patterns of interpretation rather than objective representations of reality.

Relational Legitimacy

Legitimacy is not merely a function of formal compliance or organizational effectiveness. Instead, it results from stabilized meanings that render organizational action socially understandable and acceptable.

SCOPE AND BOUNDARY CONDITIONS

The theory applies under conditions characterized by:

- high levels of interpretive plurality,
- fragmented and heterogeneous publics,
- reputational and legitimacy-related risk,
- digital platform mediation,
- the need for public justification of organizational action.

Within such environments, organizational actions, decisions, and events are typically characterized by interpretive ambiguity, allowing multiple legitimate and competing interpretations to emerge.

Conversely, the theory is not intended to explain routine technical communication in low-interpretive contexts where meanings are relatively stable, uncontested, and predictable.

CORE CONSTRUCTS

Contextual Conditions

Interpretive Ambiguity

A condition in which organizational actions allow for multiple legitimate and competing interpretations among publics.

Public Fragmentation

Public fragmentation is characterized by the emergence of interpretive communities that differ in their values, interests, and perspectives.

Algorithmic Mediation

The redistribution of the visibility of interpretations through digital platforms and algorithmic systems.

Together, these conditions generate interpretive risk, defined as the possibility that dominant public interpretations may diverge from the organization's intended meaning.

Meaning Management Capability (MMC)

Meaning management capability is an institutionalized organizational capability for coordinating interpretive processes.

It consists of three dimensions:

1. Institutionalized Sensegiving

The integration of public relations into the early stages of strategic decision-making.

2. Narrative Coherence

The alignment between organizational behavior and organizational narratives.

3. Ethical Inclusiveness

The recognition of legitimate public interests and the avoidance of the manipulative exclusion of alternative interpretations.

The Organization's Interpretive Infrastructure

Meaning management capability does not represent an individual communication competence or the skill of a single public relations practitioner. Rather, it is an organizational capability emerging from the integration of communication, cultural, and managerial processes. In this sense, meaning management may be understood as the organization's interpretive infrastructure, enabling the integration of strategic decisions, organizational identity, culture, and public expectations.

Organizations that develop a high level of meaning management capability do not merely react to interpretations emerging in their environment; they actively shape the conditions under which particular meanings become more likely, understandable, and socially acceptable.

Interpretive Practices

The operational enactment of meaning management capability includes:

framing,
narrative reconstruction,
cultural translation,
symbolic resource management.

Interpretive Practices as the Operational Mechanism of the Theory

Interpretive practices constitute the operational level of the theory. Through these practices, meaning management

capability is translated into concrete communicative action. Their primary function is not the transmission of information but the structuring of interpretive frameworks through which publics understand organizational action.

Narratives are particularly important because they connect individual events into coherent patterns of meaning. They create continuity between the organization's past, present, and future, enabling the public to interpret organizational decisions as part of a broader and meaningful whole.

In digital environments, interpretive practices are significantly shaped by the technical and social dynamics of online platforms. These dynamics include the algorithmic redistribution of attention, which influences which meanings become visible, and intensifies the competition among varying interpretations. As a result, organizations must actively engage in the management of meaning visibility to maintain interpretive coherence in an often fragmented digital landscape. Understanding these practices sets the stage for considering their outcomes.

Intermediate Outcomes

Interpretive Stability

The relative convergence of interpretations over time.

Reduction of Interpretive Risk

The reduction of the gap between intended organizational meaning and dominant public interpretations.

Interpretive Stability

Interpretive stability does not imply complete agreement among all publics or the existence of a single meaning. Rather, it refers to a condition in which dominant interpretations of organizational action remain sufficiently coherent to enable predictability in the relationship between an organization and its publics. Interpretive stability should therefore not be equated with consensus. It represents a relative and temporary convergence of interpretations that reduces uncertainty and facilitates the maintenance of trust, legitimacy, and social cooperation. Under conditions of digital fragmentation, interpretive stability becomes one of the organization's most important strategic resources.

Long-Term Outcomes

- legitimacy,
- trust,
- reputational resilience.

Reputational resilience refers to an organization's capacity to withstand and overcome interpretive disruptions.

GENERATIVE MECHANISM

The core mechanism of the theory is as follows:

Under conditions of interpretive ambiguity and public fragmentation, organizations that possess an institutionalized meaning-management capability engage in coherent, ethically inclusive interpretive practices that increase the likelihood of achieving interpretive stability. Interpretive stability, in turn, strengthens organizational legitimacy, trust, and reputational resilience.

Interpretive stability functions as a mediator between meaning

management practices and long-term organizational outcomes, while ethical inclusiveness serves as a moderator of legitimacy's sustainability.

The Meaning Manager as the Central Actor of the Theory

The primary operational agent of the meaning management process is the meaning manager. Within MMT-PR, the meaning manager does not function as a producer of messages or merely as a manager of media relations. Rather, the meaning manager acts as a coordinator of interpretive processes between the organization and its publics.

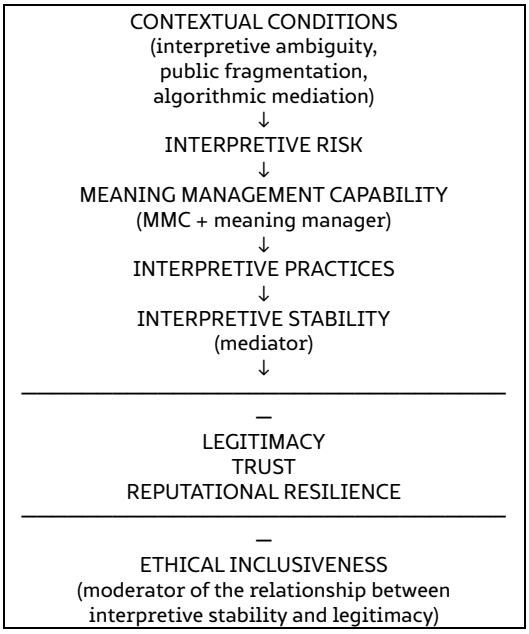
The role of the meaning manager is to connect internal sensemaking processes with external sensegiving processes, identify potential interpretive risks, and ensure alignment between organizational behavior, organizational identity, and communication narratives. In this way, the meaning manager becomes a key mechanism through which organizational decisions are transformed into socially understandable and legitimate patterns of action.

STRUCTURAL MODEL

The structural model of MMT-PR assumes that interpretive ambiguity, public fragmentation, and algorithmic mediation generate interpretive risk. In response to this risk, organizations develop meaning-management capability, operationalized through interpretive practices such as framing, narrative reconstruction, cultural translation, and symbolic resource management.

These practices increase the likelihood of achieving interpretive stability as the central mediating mechanism of the theory. Interpretive stability, in turn, enables the emergence and maintenance of legitimacy, trust, and reputational resilience. The relationship between interpretive stability and these outcomes is moderated by ethical inclusiveness, which ensures that meaning management remains within the boundaries of legitimate, responsible, and socially acceptable organizational conduct.

Figure 1. Structural Model of Meaning Management Theory in Public Relations (MMT-PR)



Source: Author's conceptualization based on MMT-PR theory.

PROPOSITIONS

The propositions represent theoretically derived statements that operationalize the fundamental assumptions of MMT-PR and enable their empirical examination. They specify the expected relationships among contextual conditions, meaning management capability, interpretive processes, and organizational outcomes, thereby providing a link between the theoretical model and future empirical research.

P1: Higher levels of interpretive ambiguity increase the strategic importance of meaning management capability.

P2: Public fragmentation increases interpretive risk.

P3: Early integration of public relations into strategic decision-making reduces interpretive risk.

P4: Narrative coherence positively influences interpretive stability.

P5: Ethical inclusiveness moderates the relationship between interpretive stability and legitimacy.

P6: Interpretive stability mediates the relationship between interpretive practices and legitimacy.

P7: Organizations with a highly developed meaning management capability exhibit greater reputational resilience during crises.

P8: Higher levels of interpretive stability positively influence organizational legitimacy, trust, and reputational resilience.

DISTINCTION FROM RELATED THEORIES

MMT-PR differs from related theories in several important respects:

Framing Theory: MMT-PR focuses on organizational capability rather than solely on message construction and framing processes.

Sensegiving Theory: MMT-PR institutionalizes sensegiving as an

organizational capability and embeds it within a broader framework of meaning management.

Symbolic Management Theory: MMT-PR introduces interpretive stability as the central mechanism through which meanings are coordinated and stabilized over time.

Reputation Theory: MMT-PR explains how reputation emerges through processes of interpretive stabilization, rather than treating it as an outcome that requires no prior explanatory mechanism.

NORMATIVE DIMENSION

The theory does not justify manipulation. Long-term stability of meaning relies on ethical inclusiveness and the recognition of interpretive plurality. Manipulative strategies may yield short-term effects but, over time, increase interpretive risk.

MMT-PR is founded on the premise that meaning management is not a process of controlling meaning but a process of responsibly managing the conditions under which interpretation occurs. Organizations cannot fully determine how their actions will be understood by the public; however, they can create transparent, coherent, and ethically grounded interpretive frameworks that increase the likelihood of socially acceptable and legitimate interpretations.

For this reason, ethical inclusiveness is not an additional value of the theory but one of its constitutive elements. It functions as a normative mechanism that constrains organizational power in shaping interpretations and ensures consideration of the legitimate interests of diverse publics. Without ethical inclusiveness, meaning management degenerates into manipulation, and manipulative strategies ultimately result in the erosion of trust, the loss of legitimacy, and a decline in organizational reputational resilience.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The theory supports methodological pluralism and can be investigated using a variety of research methods, including:

- discourse and narrative analysis;
- longitudinal case studies;
- digital analysis of interpretive clusters;
- survey-based measurements of legitimacy; and
- structural equation modeling and related analytical techniques.

LIMITATIONS

The theory is primarily applicable to contexts characterized by interpretive plurality and organizational dependence on legitimacy. It does not seek to explain all forms of organizational communication, nor does it claim universal explanatory power across all organizational contexts.

CONCLUSION

Meaning Management Theory in Public Relations (MMT-PR) conceptualizes public relations as an institutionalized organizational capability for coordinating interpretations in the face of interpretive ambiguity. In contemporary environments characterized by digital fragmentation and competing narratives, the capability to stabilize meaning becomes a

structural prerequisite for legitimacy, trust, and sustainable organizational action.

Organizations do not manage meaning in the sense of exercising complete control over it. Rather, they manage the conditions under which the stabilization of meaning becomes more likely.

MMT-PR is founded on the premise that the fundamental challenge facing contemporary organizations is interpretive rather than informational. In a world characterized by information abundance, public fragmentation, and the algorithmic shaping of communication environments, the capability to generate interpretive stability becomes as important as the management of material, financial, or human resources. Public relations is therefore theoretically repositioned as a function of meaning management rather than merely communication management, while interpretive stability emerges as the key mechanism through which organizations achieve legitimacy, trust, and long-term societal sustainability.

The original scientific contribution of MMT-PR is reflected in several interconnected elements. First, the theory introduces interpretive stability as a central theoretical construct for explaining the emergence of legitimacy, trust, and reputational resilience under conditions of interpretive plurality. Second, it conceptualizes public relations as an organizational capability for meaning management, thereby repositioning the discipline from the domain of communication management to that of meaning management. Third, the theory operationalizes the concept of the meaning manager as a strategic actor who connects sensemaking and sensegiving processes and coordinates interpretive processes between organizations and their publics. Finally, MMT-PR integrates the concepts of sensemaking, sensegiving, framing, legitimacy, trust, and reputation into a unified generative model that explains how organizations achieve relative interpretive stability in contemporary communication environments.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Meaning Management Theory in Public Relations (MMT-PR) was developed as a middle-range theory through a process of theoretical synthesis and conceptual integration of relevant insights from public relations scholarship, organizational studies, sensemaking and sensegiving theory, symbolic management, and cultural approaches to organizations. Its immediate conceptual foundation is the author's earlier theoretical work, The Meaning Manager in Contemporary Public Relations (Tomić, 2026), which first systematically advanced the proposition that contemporary public relations can be understood as an institutionalized practice of meaning management and that public relations professionals function as meaning managers.

MMT-PR represents the next stage in the theoretical development of this concept. Whereas The Meaning Manager in Contemporary Public Relations established the foundational paradigm and conceptual framework, MMT-PR operationalizes its key constructs, specifies generative mechanisms, defines causal relationships among

variables, and formulates empirically testable propositions. In doing so, the concept of the meaning manager evolves into a comprehensive public relations theory aimed at explaining the emergence of interpretive stability, legitimacy, trust, and reputational resilience in contemporary communication environments.

Through this work, the concept of the meaning manager develops from a conceptual model into a middle-range theory characterized by clearly defined constructs, a generative mechanism, a structural model, and empirically testable propositions.

The theory, therefore, represents a theoretical extension and systematic operationalization of the conceptual foundations established in The Meaning Manager in Contemporary Public Relations, which serves as its primary theoretical point of departure.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should focus on developing measurement instruments for the operationalization of interpretive stability, meaning management capability, and interpretive risk. Particular attention should be devoted to empirically testing the theory's propositions across organizations operating in different sectors, as well as within the contexts of crisis communication, digital platforms, and reputation management. Such research would further validate, refine, and develop the theoretical basis of the MMT-PR model.

TEORIJA UPRAVLJANJA ZNAČENJEM U ODNOSIMA S JAVNOŠĆU

Ovaj rad razvija teoriju upravljanja značenjem u odnosima s javnošću (engl. Meaning Management Theory in Public Relations – MMT-PR) kao teoriju srednjega dometa. Teorija objašnjava odnose s javnošću kao institucionaliziranu organizacijsku sposobnost usklađivanja interpretacija u uvjetima interpretativne pluralnosti. U suvremenome komunikacijskome okružju, obilježenome digitalnom fragmentacijom javnosti, konkurentskim narativima i ubrzanim širenjem značenja, organizacijske aktivnosti više ne posjeduju stabilna i unaprijed zadana značenja. Značenje se, naprotiv, oblikuje u društvenim procesima interpretacije.

MMT-PR odnose s javnošću ne promatra kao tehničku komunikacijsku funkciju, nego kao organizacijski mehanizam koordinacije interpretacijskih procesa. Teorija povezuje unutarnje procese oblikovanja smisla (sensemaking) s vanjskim procesima usmjeravanja i oblikovanja značenja (sensegiving). U njezinu su središtu organizacijsko značenje, sposobnost upravljanja značenjem te upravitelj značenja kao ključan nositelj interpretacijske koordinacije između organizacije i njezinih javnosti. Teorija određuje kontekstualne pretpostavke, temeljne koncepte, generativne mehanizme, strukturne odnose i empirijski provjerljive teorijske propozicije.

Polazišna je pretpostavka teorije da organizacije koje posjeduju institucionaliziranu sposobnost upravljanja značenjem razvijaju dosljedne i etički uključive interpretacijske prakse. Takve prakse povećavaju vjerojatnost uspostave interpretacijske stabilnosti, koja djeluje kao posredni mehanizam u jačanju organizacijske legitimnosti, povjerenja javnosti i reputacijske otpornosti. Istodobno, teorija naglašava da upravljanje značenjem ne podrazumijeva kontrolu značenja. Njegova je svrha odgovorno oblikovanje uvjeta u kojima se značenja stvaraju, pregovaraju i tumače, pri čemu etička uključivost predstavlja temeljni preduvjet održive legitimnosti organizacije. Rad pridonosi razvoju teorije odnosa s javnošću time što interpretaciju postavlja u samo središte organizacijskoga upravljanja te koncept upravitelja značenja teorijski razrađuje u cjelovit model upravljanja značenjem kao temeljne organizacijske sposobnosti.

Ključne riječi: teorija upravljanja značenjem; odnosi s javnošću; organizacijsko značenje; upravljanje značenjem; interpretacijska stabilnost; upravitelj značenja; legitimnost organizacije; reputacijska otpornost.