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How symmetrical employee communication leads to employee engagement and positive employee communication behaviors

The mediation of employee-organization relationships

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how a company's symmetrical internal communication efforts could influence its employees' perception of relationship outcomes with the company and the subsequent employee communication behaviors about the company to others and their turnover intention. Additionally, the mediation effects of employee-organization relationship (EOR) quality between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement were tested.

Design/methodology/approach – The study collected the data from a survey of randomly selected 438 individuals who work as sales representatives of the case organization. Respondents were randomly selected through stratified sampling. For the overall statistical procedure, this study adopted the two-step structural equation modeling: on the basis of the final measurement model analysis from confirmatory factor analysis, the proposed structural model was tested using latent variables.

Findings – The findings of this research clearly demonstrate: employee/internal communication management is linked with employee engagement; employee engagement enhances supportive employee communication behaviors and reduces turnover intention. Also, the mediation results show strong mediation of EORs on the effects of symmetrical internal communication on employee engagement.

Research limitations/implications – Employees' communication behaviors such as megaphoning and scouting have special strategic values to organizations. With information seeking, selecting, forwarding, and sharing behaviors of employees, organizations may obtain more valuable information than through formal procedures and channels. Professional literature has long been supporting the importance of fostering positive employee communication behaviors (ECBs), suggesting that WOM and information from the employees deemed as most trustworthy by the external publics. ECBs about their organizations may be viewed as a testament of the quality of EOR. This study results show that employee engagement plays a key role in creating positive ECBs.

Practical implications – Pragmatically, as noted in the findings, symmetrical communication is an important factor that leads to positive ECB. To facilitate employees' favorable communication regarding an organization, therefore, the organization needs to practice a two-way, employee-centered symmetrical communication system in its everyday communication management. Communication managers are advised to nurture internal communication practices that listen to the employees and invite their participation in addition to providing complete and fair information to employees. Second, by showing the significant positive influence of EOR on employee engagement and ECB, the finding of the study suggests that strategic relationship management with internal publics affect overall management effectiveness. Hence, organizational managers need to adopt various relationship cultivation strategies in their communication with employees, which have been previously proposed by several studies.

Originality/value – The findings of the study demonstrated that the effects of employee relationship management and symmetrical internal communication indeed exist beyond ECBs to the actual

managerial outcomes. The findings also suggest a three-stage model of employee communication management: employee/internal communication management antecedents; employee engagement; and supportive outcomes of effective employee communication programs, such as supportive/extra ECBs.

Keywords Internal communication, Corporate communication, Public relations, Employee engagement, Communication management, Employee communication

Paper type Research paper

Employees are often considered one of the most important strategic constituencies for organizations (Grunig, 1992; Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Kim and Rhee, 2011). They are one of the most critical stakeholders because they are the strongest supporters and possibly the most vocal critics of the organization if internal policies do not meet their expectations (Waters *et al.*, 2013).

Despite its significance to organizational effectiveness and success, employee relations has been relatively understudied in public relations research (McCown, 2007; Ni, 2007; Seltzer *et al.*, 2012), and there exist only a handful of studies that have directly examined employee-organization relationships (EORs) (e.g. Kim, 2007; Kim and Rhee, 2011; Men, 2014; Men and Stacks, 2014; Shen, 2011; Waters *et al.*, 2013). However, a steady stream of researchers recently began examining links between internal communications and organizational performance (e.g. Broom and Dozier, 1983; Dozier, 1990; Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Meng and Berger, 2012; Stacks and Michaelson, 2010; Yates, 2006), and the values of excellent internal communications have been noted in fostering better relationships with employees and espousing employee engagement (e.g. Kress, 2005; Lockwood, 2007). This study attempts to expand upon these existing scholarly endeavors to examine EORs in the broader context of organization-public relationships (OPRs) and employee engagement, a key employee outcome that produces success in organizations by examining how a company's symmetrical internal communication efforts could influence its employees' perception of relationship outcomes and the subsequent employee communication behaviors (ECBs) and their loyalty intention. Subsequently, the study also proposes to explore the link between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement. More central focus of the study was to test these links with the introduction of mediation of EOR quality between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement. Further, the study examines how these intricate connections lead to employee external communication behaviors.

EORs

EORs have been the subject of many scholarly inquiries and have been viewed as an important driver that connects human resources management practices and strategies to tangible business outcomes such as customer service quality, employee loyalty, and job performance. An EOR is "an overarching term to describe the relationship between the employee and the organization" (Shore *et al.*, 2004, p. 292). The term typically includes concepts such as the psychological contract and perceived organizational support on the micro level as well as the employment relationship on the macro level (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore, 2007). Similarly, Tsui and Wang (2002) described the EOR as "the formal and informal, the economic, social, and psychological connection between an employee and his or her employer" (p. 78). Usually examined from the perspective of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the EOR in human resources management literature is often perceived as involving certain obligations of reciprocation (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). Scholars of social exchange theory have emphasized the rules of engagement that are based on reciprocating benefits between relational parties (Cotterell *et al.*, 1992), and this norm of reciprocity (social exchange) has been the main framework through which the mechanism of the EOR has been understood and examined (Coyle-Shapiro and Shore, 2007).

However, understanding EORs from the social exchange perspective has limitations in that it cannot always explain the acts of employees or organizations that are not governed by self-interests (Batson, 1990). Coyle-Shapiro and Conway (2004) noted that "an exclusive reliance on exchange-based frameworks may not do justice to the range of forms that may govern how individuals act in their relationship with their employer" (p. 21). Further, the extant approaches to understand EORs from a human resources management perspective lack clear conceptualization and sound operationalization, limiting the utility of the concept in understanding the relationships between the EOR and other key employee outcomes such as employee engagement, identification, and loyalty. In most research, the EOR is not directly observed, but rather indirectly assessed based on antecedents such as human resource practices, including employee contributions and employer investments (e.g. Tsui *et al.*, 1997), and organizational factors such as perceived organizational support and job autonomy (e.g. Bell and Mengue, 2002). These approaches consequently seem to fail to recognize the relational components in EOR research.

In public relations literature, the EOR has been understood as a conceptual extension of the OPR in the employee relations context. Given that employees are the most important strategic public, whose "attitudes, behaviors, and performance directly contribute to productivity, organizational performance, and success" (Men, 2012, p. 29), public relations scholars (e.g. Jo and Shim, 2005; Kim and Rhee, 2011; Ni, 2007) have applied the OPR definition and measurement to analyze the EOR.

EOR as OPR

With ever-increasing emphasis on the value of relationship management in public relations research, many scholars have examined the significance of quality relationships for effective public relations management in various contexts (Bruning and Ledingham, 1998; Grunig and Huang, 2000; Ledingham and Bruning, 2000). Unlike marketing studies that view relationships with customers as the source of profits (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Peppard, 2000), public relations studies regard relationships as an effective tool to measure the short-term as well as the long-term values of communication programs beyond financial contribution (Grunig, 2006). Led by several scholars, there has been significant growth in OPR research (e.g. Hon and Grunig, 1999; Huang, 1997, 2001; Ledingham and Bruning, 2000) over the past 25 years.

Since Broom *et al.* (1997) called for better scholarly conceptualization and operational measures of OPR, Bruning and Ledingham (1998) defined the OPR as the "state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political, and/or culture well-being of the other entity" (p. 160)[1]. If this conceptualization of OPR was grounded in the relationship impact, Huang (1997) and Grunig and Huang's (2000) conceptualization of the OPR offered a slightly different approach, defining the OPR from the perspective of relationship characteristics (Huang, 2001): "the degree that the organization and its publics trust one another, agree on one has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another" (Huang, 1998, p. 12). This conceptual approach viewed the OPR as a variable with four relational dimensions: trust, control mutuality, satisfaction, and commitment. Haung's approach advanced the field in that it offered ways for scholars to measure the quality of the OPR through four key characteristics and to examine the key antecedents and consequences of the OPR and the links between the OPR and other key PR variables such as communication efforts and reputation.

This study adopted and revised the existing OPR definition and measurements to analyze the EOR. Hence, the EOR is defined as the perceived quality of the relationship between an organization and its employees in terms of levels of commitment, trust, satisfaction, and control mutuality. Commitment refers to the extent to which employees feel

that they are part of the organization; trust indicates the extent to which employees feel they can rely on their organization; satisfaction means the extent to which employees are satisfied with their relationship with their organization; and control mutuality refers to the extent to which employees feel they exert a similar amount of control over their interactions as does the organization. To measure the EOR, this study applies Huang's organization-public relationship assessment (OPRA) scale (Huang, 1997, 2001), which has been largely replicated in many OPR studies (Ki, 2013; Ki and Hon, 2007; Yang, 2007), some in an employee relations context (Kim, 2007).

Factors that are related to EOR quality

Organizations increasingly look for effective strategies to interact and to maintain long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationships with their employees (Waters *et al.*, 2013). Recently, public relations studies have shown the influence of various factors on the perceptions and realities of the EOR. For example, Ni (2007) found several influencing factors and classified them into three levels, individual, organizational, and macro-environmental; these factors include the category of employees, preferences and management styles of top management, developmental stages of organizations and organizational types. Jiang (2012) examined the work-life conflict issues in the context of the EOR and found that the factors such as fairness, time-oriented work-life conflicts, and procedural justice influenced the relationship with employers. In their study of the relationship between EOR and the ethical decisions making among young public relations agency employees, Gallicano *et al.* (2012) found that the participants had a good relationship with their employers if they perceive fewer constraints on their autonomy in ethical decision making.

Symmetrical internal communication

Grunig (1992) suggested that organizations need to approach their employee relations similarly to their relations with other key stakeholders: "Excellent programs of employee communications are based on the concepts of strategic management, an integrated communication function, and the managerial role, and the two-way symmetrical model of public relations" (p. 536). Theorizing the link between symmetrical internal communication and excellent programs of employee communications, Grunig (2001) further argued that excellent employee communications could ultimately produce quality employee relationships and supportive employee behaviors toward the organizations. Referred to as communication efforts for symbiotic interests (Grunig, 2001), symmetrical communication is often characterized by its emphasis on "trust, credibility, openness, […] reciprocity, network symmetry, horizontal communication, feedback, […] negotiation" (Grunig, 1989, p. 558; cited in Kim and Rhee, 2011, p. 252). This suggests the influence of symmetrical communication efforts on the quality of EORs. Several other studies have also showed empirical supports for such a connection. For example, employees who receive positive communication about their performance tend to be more motivated to maintain trusting relationships with their organization (Jo and Shim, 2005). Also, certain internal organizational practices such as symmetrical and transparent communications with employees have been found to be associated with good EOR quality (Men, 2014). The current study tested this link with the following hypothesis:

H1. Organizations' symmetrical internal communication efforts will be positively associated with good EORs.

Employee engagement

Similar to the development of the OPR and EOR, the concept of employee engagement has gone through several stages of conceptualization (for a comprehensive review of this

development, see Welch, 2011). Earlier understanding of engagement centered on work engagement, how well an employee performs her/his duties. From the employee's perspective, being engaged is a state of mind, a psychological state of being engrossed in one's role as an employee and team member. Maslach and Leiter (1997) viewed engagement as the direct opposite of the three burnout dimensions (i.e. exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of professional efficacy) and defined employee engagement in terms of energy, involvement, and efficacy[2]. Viewing engagement as different from a temporary and specific state, Schaufeli *et al.* (2001) later defined employee engagement as "a positive fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (p. 74).

Researchers have shown that the effectiveness of internal communication is a leading indicator of organizational success (e.g. Ehling *et al.*, 1992; Ruck and Welch, 2012). According to Meng and Berger (2012), the values created by excellent internal communications in organizations are often future-oriented, such as issue recommendations and potential growth in investor opportunities. In recent years, as companies have begun recognizing the importance of engaged employees for direct business outcomes such as good performance, innovation, and productivity (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008), employee engagement has emerged as a vital concept that affects organizational effectiveness and competitiveness (Morris, 2010). Prior to this recent interest in employee engagement and the subsequent effort to understand its role in overall organizational communication contexts, excellent internal communication had been recognized as something that can affect an organization's ability to engage its employees (Kress, 2005). For example, the Corporate Leadership Council's (2004a, b) report noted that employee engagement was strongly affected by organizational characteristics, such as good internal communication, an innovative culture, and a reputation for integrity. Similarly, Lockwood (2007) discussed that transparent and consistent internal communication from the management was an important driver of employee engagement (Morris, 2010; Welch and Jackson, 2007; Jiang and Men, 2015). This study tests the link between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement:

H2. The perceived quality of symmetrical internal communication will lead to a high level of employee engagement.

The possible link between an excellent EOR and a higher level of employee engagement is both conceptually and empirically suggested in the literature. After examining UK organizations, MacLeod and Clarke (2009) found that employee engagement is at "the heart of workplace relationship between employee and employer" (p. 3). Similarly, Robinson *et al.* (2004) noted that workforce engagement requires a two-way relationship between an employee and an employer. This implies the importance of a mutually beneficial relationship in order to engender engagement (Kang, 2014).

A positive association between employee engagement and each dimension of relationship quality is strongly implied in the literature. Employee trust and satisfaction are dubbed as the cornerstones of quality relationships, and their impacts on employee engagement are well documented in the organizational literature (e.g. Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Harter *et al.*, 2002). Regarding control mutuality, Towers Perrin-ISR (2006, as cited in MacLeod and Clarke, 2011) found that "78 percent of highly engaged public servant reported that they believe they can have an impact on public service delivery or customer service against only 29 percent of the disengaged" (p 12). This indicates that there is a higher perception of mutual control among engaged employees than in those who are disengaged. Also, individuals who perceive their company or job to be making a mutual commitment to them are more likely to be motivated to do their job well. This is consistent with the scholarly view of affective commitment as one of the main characteristics of employee engagement (e.g. Wellins and Concelman, 2005).

Recently, Kang (2014) called for the test of this link, suggesting that a quality relationship between stakeholders and organization is a driver of quality public engagement. However, the link between employee engagement and the quality of the EOR in all four characteristic dimensions (trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality) has not been fully explored in the extant literature. Among the few attempts, Men (2015) found that employee engagement was positively influenced by a quality EOR. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis to be tested:

H3. Better perception of EOR by employees will lead to a higher level of employee engagement.

ECBs

Communication behaviors of employees who interact with the public are critical because employees are perceived as a credible source of information regarding the organization (First and Tomic, 2013). As informal agents of boundary spanning (Kim and Rhee, 2011), employees gather valuable information for their organizations and distribute the learned information to other members of their organizations (Dozier, 1990; Okura *et al.*, 2009). Also, employees often obtain, pursue, and disseminate information about their organization in an active manner; their communication behaviors may include making reference to and supporting the organization, collecting information about the organization, sharing information with the organization, and building support networks inside and outside the organization (Heide and Simonsson, 2011; Kim and Grunig, 2011; Kim and Rhee, 2011; Mazzei, 2014).

Kim and Rhee (2011) provided a conceptualization and a measurement of ECBs. Conceptualizing ECBs into two categories of megaphoning and scouting effects, they defined positive megaphoning as "employee's positive external communication behaviors about their organizational accomplishments or problems" (p. 247) and scouting as "employees' voluntary communication efforts to bring relevant information to the organization" (p. 247). They also found positive megaphoning and scouting effects among employees with good relationships, and that those employees became voluntary organizational advocates. In other words, employees with good relationships were likely to decrease "strategic threats" to the organization by willingly seeking, processing, forwarding, and sharing information about negative organizational issues and problems (Kim *et al.*, 2008, p. 752). On the other hand, employees with poor relationships with the organization were likely to play the role of "organizational adversaries" (Kim and Rhee, 2011, p. 262) by disseminating negative information about the organization to the public (i.e. negative megaphoning). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis to test the link between EOR quality and ECBs:

H4. A quality EOR will result in increased intention for positive megaphoning (a) and scouting (b) and in decreased intention for negative megaphoning (c).

Employee engagement and positive external communication behaviors by employees in terms of advocacy are rather well discussed in organizational management literature. Engaged employees display a higher level of positive communication behaviors than disengaged employees. Gallup (2003, as cited in MacLeod and Clarke, 2011) found that 67 percent of engaged employees reported that they could advocate for their company, and 78 percent said they would recommend their company's products or service, compared to 13 percent of the disengaged. By definition, employee engagement indicates voluntary extra-role behaviors in support of their company (Erickson, 2005). This implies a positive link between a high level of employee engagement and positive ECBs (i.e. positive megaphoning and scouting). Conceptualized as negative external communication behaviors, negative megaphoning refers to employees' badmouthing of their organization to outsiders. According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), burnout, the antipode of employee engagement, is

characterized by exhaustion (low activation) and cynicism (low identification). This suggests that engaged employees are less likely to experience exhaustion and cynicism, whereas disengaged employees are more likely to display cynicism. Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

> H5. High employee engagement will result in increased intention for positive megaphoning (a) and scouting (b) and in decreased intention for negative megaphoning (c).

EOR as the mediator between symmetrical communication and employee engagement

Even though the direct link between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement is strongly suggested in the literature (discussed earlier leading to H2), the current study examines the EOR as a mediator between symmetrical communication and employee engagement. According to the studies of employee engagement, trust and satisfaction are the key drivers of employee engagement, and it is worthwhile to test the important roles of these relational concepts (trust and satisfaction along with commitment and control mutuality) in connecting symmetrical internal communication to employee engagement. The absence of key engagement drivers in the entire model may reveal the important role of EOR as the key mediator between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement. Therefore, the following research question is proposed to examine how the EOR mediates the relationship between symmetrical communication and employee engagement:

> RQ1. To what extent do EORs mediate the effects of symmetrical internal communication on employee engagement?

Engagement as the mediator between EORs and ECBs

The current study explores possible mediation effects of employee engagement between the quality of EORs and EOBs and employee turnover intention. Some studies have tested the direct link between EOR quality and supportive ECBs (see previous discussion leading to H4). However, employee engagement has been strongly suggested as a possible mediator between conditions that bring about enhanced employee engagement and positive employee outcomes such as higher productivity, better customer service, and loyalty (e.g. Maslach et al., 2001; Saks, 2006). This role of engagement as a mediator was recently discussed by Kang (2014), whose study of public engagement examined trust and satisfaction as key drivers of engagement and loyalty as well as positive WOM as the outcome of engagement. Kang found that engagement played a significant mediating role connecting the key characteristics of OPRs (i.e. trust and satisfaction) and supportive behavioral intentions. Noting the importance of affective motivation as the critical link that connects cognitive evaluations (beliefs) to OPRs and behavioral intentions, Kang (2014) emphasized that the affective orientation as manifested in engagement is a critical link that connects relationship quality and behavioral intentions. As conceptually understood in the literature, employee engagement contains both cognitive and affective aspects in its definition as "a positive fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2001, p. 74). Hence, the following research question is proposed to examine if the extent to which employees feel engaged with their organization mediates the effect of EOR quality on employee communication about their company to outsiders as well as on employee intention to leave their current company (turnover intention). Logically, it is expected that, for employees with a higher level of engagement, the effect of EOR quality will amplify positive megaphoning, reduce negative megaphoning, and further increase scouting behaviors. On the contrary, for

employees with a low level of engagement, the effect of EOR on communication behaviors might not be very strong:

RQ2. To what extent does employee engagement mediate the effects of positive EORs on employee communication?

Methods

Case organization

The organization that was examined in this study is a leading beauty company that manufactures and sells cosmetic and personal care products in South Korea. The company was selected because it has a wide range of retail and sales channels and hires a large number of employees who are in direct contact with consumers through those channels. The company, established about 70 years ago, has been named one of the most admired South Korea employers for several years.

Participants and data collection

Data collection was conducted with a total of 438 employees who worked as sales representatives for the case organization in the Seoul metropolitan area. Participants were drawn from all of the four channels of sales through which the company distributes its merchandise: department stores, door-to-door sales, cosmetic specialty shops, and discount stores. Respondents were randomly selected through stratified sampling and contacted by trained interviewers via telephone to ask if they were willing to participate in an in-person survey. Once they agreed, the interviewers visited them and conducted the survey face-to-face. Due to the characteristics of the products and the company, all of the participants were female. The average respondent was 34.4 years old and had 4.7 years of tenure with the company.

The survey was conducted in Korean. Since the questionnaire was originally developed in English, the researchers, who were both fluent in English and Korean, translated it into Korean. Due to the syntactic differences between Korean and English, the questionnaire was not translated verbatim. It was translated literally to convey the meaning of each question item. To double-check the meaning of each item, people fluent in both Korean and English checked the validity of the translation and revised the questionnaire. The Korean version of survey was pretested for clarity and then used for the survey.

Measurements

All items were measured a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The proposed measurement model was tested through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The initial measurement model, without modification, had the following data-model fits: $\chi^2(420, n=438) = 1,963.16$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.76$, SRMR = 0.054, RMSEA = 0.06 (90 percent CI: 0.06, 0.07), and CFI = 0.91. To improve the data fits of the proposed model, the researchers modified the initial model using the Lagrange Multipliers test by covarying 12 sets of errors within the same latent variable systems. The range of error covariance in the modified model was strictly limited to those within the same latent variable model (Byrne, 2001), which included the following covariances: two error covariances for symmetrical communication (V1-V2; V3-V4); four error covariances for EORs (V5-V6 for trust; V6-V7 for trust; V8-V9 for satisfaction; V11-V12 for commitment; and V11-V13 for commitment); two error covariances for scouting (V34-V36; V36-V37); and three error covariances for employee engagement (V19-V20 for vigor; V21-V22 for dedication; and V24-V25 for absorption). The detailed, full wordings of each measurement item are presented in Table I (e.g. V2 = "Our company encourages differences of opinion"). After such modifications, the proposed measurement model was retained as a valid model: $\chi^2(432, n=438) = 1,222.43$, $p < 0.001$,

Latent variable	Measurement item	Std. estimate
Symmetrical internal communication ($\alpha = 0.93$)	Most communication between managers and other employees in our company can be said to be two-way communication (V1)	0.85
	Our company encourages differences of opinion (V2)	0.90
	The purpose of communication in our company is to help managers to be responsive to the problems of other employees (V3)	0.91
	Employees are not afraid to speak up during meetings with supervisors and managers (V4)	0.82
2nd order: OPRA[a] ($\alpha = 0.95$)	Trust	0.98
	Satisfaction	0.85
	Commitment	0.93
	Control mutuality	0.94
Trust ($\alpha = 0.90$)	Whenever this company makes an important decision, it will be concerned about me (V5)	0.88
	This company can be relied on to keep its promises (V6)	0.81
	I believe that this company takes my opinions into account when making decisions (V7)	0.92
Satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.77$)	I am happy with this company (V8)	0.92
	Both the organization and I benefit from the relationship (V9)	0.85
	I am not happy in my interactions with this company (R) (V10)	0.44
Commitment ($\alpha = 0.89$)	I feel that this company is trying to maintain a long-term commitment to me (V11)	0.89
	I can see that this company wants to maintain a relationship with me (V12)	0.92
	Compared to other organizations, I value my relationship with this company more (V13)	0.77
Control mutuality ($\alpha = 0.89$)	This company and I are attentive to what each other say (V14)	0.91
	This company believes my opinions are legitimate (V15)	0.91
	This company has a tendency to throw its weight around (R) (V16)	0.77
2nd order: employee engagement ($\alpha = 0.93$)	Vigor	0.87
	Dedication	0.92
	Absorption	0.94
Vigor ($\alpha = 0.82$)	When I get up in the morning. I feel like going to work (V18)	0.74
	At my work, I feel bursting with energy (V19)	0.85
	At my work I always persevere even when things do not go well (V20)	0.75
Dedication ($\alpha = 0.90$)	I am enthusiastic about my job (V21)	0.78
	I am proud on the work that I do (V22)	0.91
	I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose (V23)	0.92
Absorption ($\alpha = 0.84$)	Time flies when I am working (V24)	0.80
	I am immersed in my work (V25)	0.78
	I feel happy when I am working intensely (V26)	0.81
Positive megaphoning ($\alpha = 0.69$)	Write positive comments for my organization on the internet (V27)	0.46
	Say good things to friends and neighbors about positive aspects of the management and company (V28)	0.82
	Routinely recommend my organization and its service/products to people (V29)	0.72
	Refute prejudiced or stereotyped opinions about my organization (V30)	0.46
Negative megaphoning ($\alpha = 0.77$)	Post negative things about my organization on the internet (V31)	0.77
	Talk to people about the problems of our service or products (V32)	0.58
	Agree with people who criticize my organization (V33)	0.84
Scouting ($\alpha = 0.74$)	Voluntarily check people's feedback on organizational events (V34)	0.66
	Search for new information and subscribe to Listserv, newsletters, publications for organization (V35)	0.79
	Meet people who work for similar businesses and check rumors and news about organization or business (V36)	0.51
	Start conversation or give information to relevant colleagues about new trends or unusual signals related to work (V37)	0.62

Table I.
Confirmatory factory analysis (CFA) in standardized estimates in the final model (mediated)

Notes: $\chi^2(432, n = 438) = 1,222.43$; $p < 0.001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.18$; CFA $= 0.95$, SRMR $= 0.05$; and RMSEA $= 0.05$ (90 percent CI: 0.05, 0.06). [a]OPRA, Organization-Public Relationship Assessment Scale. Standardized estimates all significant at ***$p < 0.001$

χ^2/df = 2.18, CFA = 0.95, SRMR = 0.05, and RMSEA = 0.05 (90 percent CI: 0.05, 0.06) (see Table I). The structural model was not modified.

First, to measure symmetrical internal communication efforts, following the example of Kim and Rhee's (2011) study on employee relationships, this study adopted Kim's (2007) measurement items modified from Grunig (2001) (see Table I). The reliability showed an α value of 0.93, and the range of standardized estimates was 0.82-0.91. Second, to measure EORs, the OPRA scale (Grunig and Huang, 2000; Huang, 1997, 2001) was adopted. The reliability of the second-order latent measurement model was demonstrated with a 0.95 α value for the composite of the four factors: trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality. Standardized estimates in the second-order measurement model ranged from 0.85 to 0.98. For each of the four latent variables, the reliability was 0.90 for trust, 0.77 for satisfaction, 0.89 for commitment, and 0.89 for control mutuality. In addition, the current study adopted a scale of employee engagement from Schaufeli *et al.* (2001), which is composed of three factors: vigor, dedication, and absorption. The reliability of the proposed second-order measurement model was 0.93. The reliability was 0.82 for vigor, 0.90 for dedication, and 0.84 for absorption.

To measure ECBs, this study adopted Kim and Rhee's (2011) scale of ECBs, which consists of three factors: positive megaphoning, negative megaphoning, and scouting. They developed the measurements for scouting from scales developed by Stoffels (1994) and Tushman and Scanlan (1981) and for megaphoning using a scale developed by Kim and Grunig (2011). For the current study, this scale of ECBs had a reliability of 0.77 for negative megaphoning, 0.69 for positive megaphoning, and 0.74 for scouting. Following the original study, the current study used the first-order measurement model. Last, this study adopted a scale of employee retention from Carmeli and Freund (2009). The reliability of turnover retention was 0.92.

Analysis
To test the hypotheses in the structural model (see Figures 1 and 2), the current study compared two models (baseline model vs mediating model of EORs) using second-order factors for the latent variables of employee engagement and EORs and first-order factors for ECBs (i.e. positive megaphoning, negative megaphoning, and scouting) since they are conceptually distinctive, as in Kim and Rhee (2011). IBM SPASS AMOS version 22 was used for data analysis.
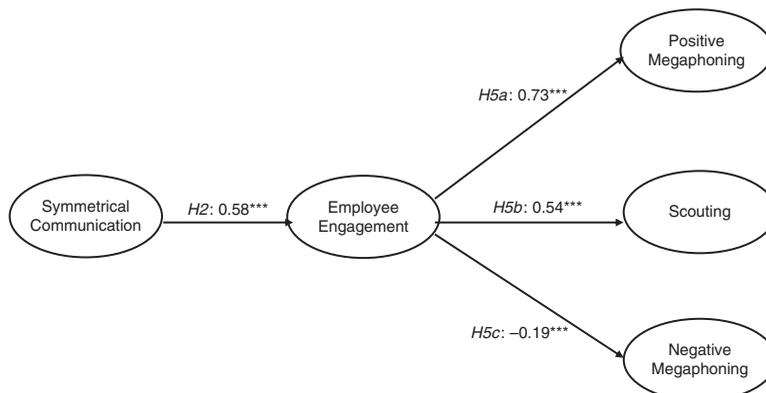
Notes: Coefficients are standardized coefficients. χ^2(262, n=438)=817.89, p<0.001, χ^2/df=3.12, SRMR=0.09, RMSEA=0.07 (90 percent CI: 0.06, 0.08) and CFI=0.91. ***p<0.001

Figure 1.
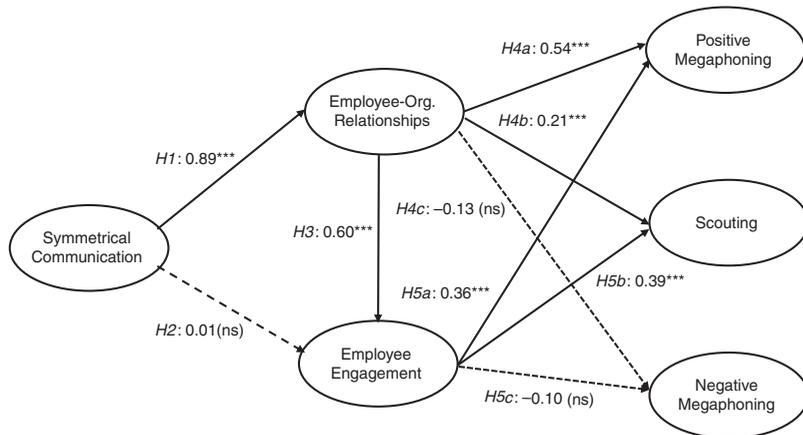The results of the baseline model in latent variables

Notes: Coefficients are standardized coefficients. $\chi^2(566, n=438) = 1{,}258.61$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.22$, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.05 (90 percent CI: 0.05, 0.06) and CFI = 0.94. ***$p < 0.001$

For the overall statistical procedure, this study adopted the two-step structural equation model (Byrne, 2001; Kline, 1998). On the basis of the final measurement model analysis from CFA, the proposed structural model was tested using latent variables. To compare the results of this study to past and future research, this study used Cronbach's α to measure the reliability of the internal consistency for measurement items. For the mediation test of employee engagement, the bootstrap procedure ($n = 1{,}000$) was used to generate a 95 percent bias-corrected (BC) confidence interval (Preacher and Hayes, 2008).

Results

Structural model testing

As noted, the two-step structural equation modeling was used. This study found that the data-model fits for the baseline model (Model 1) were not acceptable: for Model 1 (Baseline), $\chi^2(262, n = 438) = 817.89$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.12$, SRMR = 0.09, RMSEA = 0.07 (90 percent CI: 0.06, 0.08), and CFI = 0.91. However, when EORs were included in the model (i.e. Model 2: mediated model), as in the final measurement model, the proposed structural model was shown to be valid: for Model 2 (Mediated), $\chi^2(566, n = 438) = 1{,}258.61$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/df = 2.22$, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.05 (90 percent CI: 0.05, 0.06), and CFI = 0.94. The proposed model had RMSEA $\leqslant 0.06$ ($= 0.053$) and SRMR $\leqslant 0.10$ ($= 0.061$) to pass the threshold of Hu and Bentler's (1999) cutoff criteria (see Table II).

Hypotheses testing

H1 tested the effects of symmetrical internal communication efforts on EORs. As theoretically expected, this relationship was positive and strong, so the hypothesis was supported. Greater symmetrical internal communication efforts were significantly associated with an increase in the positive quality of employee relationships: $b = 0.96$, SE $= 0.05$, $\beta = 0.89$, $p < 0.001$ (see Table II).

H2 tested the effect of symmetrical internal communication efforts on employee engagement. In Model 1 (i.e. baseline model without mediation of EORs), this relationship was positive and strong, so the hypothesis was supported. Greater symmetrical internal communication efforts were significantly related to an increase in the degree of employee

Model	H	Independent		Dependent	Unstandardized	Standardized	p
Model 1	H2	Symmetrical communication	→	Employee engagement	0.47 (0.05)	0.58	***
(Baseline)	H5a	Employee engagement	→	Positive megaphoning	0.51 (0.06)	0.73	***
	H5b	Employee engagement	→	Scouting	0.44 (0.06)	0.54	***
	H5c	Employee engagement	→	Negative megaphoning	−0.23 (0.07)	−0.19	***
Model 2	H1	Symmetrical communication	→	Employee-org. relationships	0.96 (0.05)	0.89	***
(Mediated)	H2	Symmetrical communication	→	Employee engagement	0.01 (0.10)	0.01	ns
	H3	Employee-org. relationships	→	Employee engagement	0.46 (0.10)	0.60	***
	H4a	Employee-org. relationships	→	Positive megaphoning	0.27 (0.04)	0.54	***
	H4b	Employee-org. relationships	→	Scouting	0.13 (0.04)	0.21	**
	H4c	Employee-org. relationships	→	Negative megaphoning	−0.12 (0.07)	−0.13	0.07
	H5a	Employee engagement	→	Positive megaphoning	0.24 (0.04)	0.36	***
	H5b	Employee engagement	→	Scouting	0.32 (0.06)	0.39	***
	H5c	Employee engagement	→	Negative megaphoning	−0.12 (0.09)	−0.10	0.19

Notes: $n = 438$. Standard errors in parentheses. For Model 1 (Baseline), $\chi^2(262, n = 438) = 817.89$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/\mathrm{df} = 3.12$, SRMR = 0.09, RMSEA = 0.07 (90 percent CI: 0.06, 0.08), and CFI = 0.91; For Model 2 (Mediated), $\chi^2(566, n = 438) = 1,258.61$, $p < 0.001$, $\chi^2/\mathrm{df} = 2.22$, SRMR = 0.06, RMSEA = 0.05 (90 percent CI: 0.05, 0.06), and CFI = 0.94. **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

Table II.
Direct effect estimates
in the proposed latent
variable models

engagement: $b = 0.47$, SE = 0.05, $\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$. However, it is noteworthy that this significant effect was attenuated to almost null in Model 2 (i.e. mediated model) due to the full mediation effects of EORs: $b = 0.01$, SE = 0.10, $\beta = 0.01$, ns.

Regarding the effects of EORs on employee engagement, the result supported *H3*. Employees with a higher assessment of employee relationship quality demonstrated a significantly greater level of employee engagement: $b = 0.46$, SE = 0.10, $\beta = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$.

Next, the current study tested three hypotheses on the role of employee relationships on three facets of ECBs (i.e. positive megaphoning, negative megaphoning, and scouting). Among them, the effect of employee relationships on the likelihood of positive megaphoning behaviors (*H4a*) was the greatest: $b = 0.27$, SE = 0.04, $\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$. Also, the effect of employee relationships on scouting behaviors (*H4b*) was also positive and significant: $b = 0.13$, SE = 0.04, $\beta = 0.21$, $p < 0.01$. However, this study failed to find support for the effect of employee relationships on negative megaphoning behaviors (*H4c*): $b = −0.12$, SE = 0.07, $\beta = −0.13$, $p = 0.07$, ns. This relationship was negative, as theorized, but the effect size was too weak to be statistically significant.

This study also tested a series of research hypotheses about the role of employee engagement on ECBs. In Model 1 (i.e. baseline model without mediation of EORs), all three paths were statistically significant. Greater employee engagement resulted in significantly more positive megaphoning behaviors (*H5a*): $b = 0.51$, SE = 0.06, $\beta = 0.73$, $p < 0.001$. Also, greater employee engagement had significant, positive effects on scouting behaviors (*H5b*): $b = 0.44$, SE = 0.06, $\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$. Last, the effect of employee engagement on the likelihood of negative megaphoning behaviors (*H5c*) was statistically significant: $b = −0.23$, SE = 0.07, $\beta = −0.19$, $p < 0.001$. In Model 2 (i.e. mediated model of EORs), the results were similar except for the insignificant effect of employee engagement on negative megaphoning (*H5c*): $b = −0.12$, SE = 0.09, $\beta = −0.10$, $p = 0.19$, ns.

Testing the mediations of EORs and employee engagement
This study aimed to contribute to previous research (e.g. Kim, 2007; Kim and Rhee, 2011) by testing two mediation effects: the mediation of EORs between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement (*RQ1*) and the mediation of employee engagement between EORs and ECBs. For this purpose, this study used the bootstrap procedure (1,000 samples) to generate a 95 percent BC confidence interval.

RQ1. The mediation results of EORs between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement showed full mediation: $\beta = 0.54$, SE $= 0.13$ (95 percent BC-CI interval: 0.30, 0.81), $p < 0.01$. As Table II suggests, the results of this mediation were very noticeable. In the baseline model without mediation (i.e. Model 1), the direct effect of symmetrical communication on employee engagement was strong ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). However, in Model 2, with the mediation of EORs, this significant effect was almost null ($\beta = 0.01$, ns). Additionally, the unacceptable data-model fits of Model 1 changed to be retainable as a valid model in Model 2 (i.e. the mediated model of EOR). To summarize, the study found a significant mediating role of EORs between symmetrical internal communication and employee engagement.

RQ2. Except for the effects on negative megaphoning behaviors, the results indicated that all other mediation effects of employee engagement were significant. Strong mediation effects of employee engagement were found between employee relationship and scouting behaviors (i.e. EOR → employee engagement → scouting): $\beta = 0.24$, SE $= 0.08$ (95 percent BC-CI interval: 0.11, 0.44), $p < 0.01$; and between employee relationship and positive megaphoning behaviors (i.e. EOR → employee engagement → positive megaphoning): $\beta = 0.21$, SE $= 0.06$ (95 percent BC-CI interval: 0.11, 0.37), $p < 0.01$ (see Table III). However, the mediating effect of employee engagement between EORs and negative megaphoning was not significant: $\beta = -0.06$, SE $= 0.05$ (95 percent BC-CI interval: -0.17, 0.02), $p = 0.15$.

Discussion
Employees are one of the most important constituents of an organization. The role of symmetrical communication efforts by companies has been closely examined in various stakeholder contexts in public relations scholarship. However, it has not been explored much in the employee relationship context. This is a particularly pertinent subject to explore as the concept of engagement has emerged as a powerful driver of positive behaviors and attitudes that employees have toward their organizations. The study examines how a company's symmetrical internal communication efforts could influence its employees'

Independent	Mediating	Dependent	Standardized	95% BC CI Lower	Upper	p
Symmetrical communication	→ Employee-org. relationships	→ Employee engagement	0.54 (0.13)	0.30	0.81	**
Employee-org. relationships	→ Employee engagement	→ Positive megaphoning	0.21 (0.06)	0.11	0.37	**
Employee-org. relationships	→ Employee engagement	→ Scouting	0.24 (0.08)	0.11	0.44	**
Employee-org. relationships	→ Employee engagement	→ Negative megaphoning	−0.06 (0.05)	−0.17	0.02	0.15

Table III.
Indirect effect estimates in the final model

Notes: $n = 438$. Standard errors in parentheses. 95 percent BC CI: 95 percent bias-corrected confidence interval. The number of bootstrap samples was 1,000. Estimation method was maximum likelihood. χ^2(566, $n = 438) = 1,258.61$, $p < 0.001$, χ^2/df $= 2.22$, SRMR $= 0.06$, RMSEA $= 0.05$ (90 percent CI: 0.05, 0.06), and CFI $= 0.94$. **$p < 0.01$

perceptions of relationship outcomes with the company and the subsequent ECBs about the company to others. Additionally, the mediation effects of employee engagement between employee management efforts (i.e. symmetrical internal communication and employee relationship quality) and ECBs were tested.

Key findings
There are key research findings to discuss. First, similar to the findings from previous research (e.g. Kim, 2007; Kim and Rhee, 2011), this study clearly demonstrated the very strong, positive effects of symmetrical internal communication efforts on EORs. This finding indicates that symmetrical communication plays a significant role in employee perception and assessment of a quality relationship with their company and reinforces the importance of transparent and two-way symmetrical communication in employee relations. The study further found that the organization's symmetrical internal communication efforts contribute greatly toward a higher level of employee engagement. This is consistent with what Men (2015) found in the examination of the mediating role of transparency that connects symmetrical internal communication efforts and positive EOR outcomes.

Additionally, this study showed that EOR and employee engagement generally had significant effects on positive ECBs (i.e. positive megaphoning and scouting behaviors) but not on negative megaphoning behaviors. Previously, Kim and Rhee (2011) found significant effects of EOR on both positive and negative megaphoning. When the effect sizes of these variables were compared, however, they found much greater effects of EOR on positive megaphoning behaviors than on negative megaphoning. One possible explanation for the lack of significance on negative megaphoning in the current study may be due to the cultural context of the study organization and its employees. Culturally, it is quite common in Korea for a person to have a lifetime employment with a single company, and the workplace is often considered a second family, with devotion and loyalty that are hard to find in Western culture. Hence, it is possible that employees consider the act of badmouthing their employer to outsiders an undesirable thing even when they are not satisfied with the company.

The study also tested the mediating functions of employee engagement on symmetrical internal communication and EOR, respectively, on ECBs, i.e., positive and negative megaphoning and scouting. Employee engagement significantly mediated the effects of symmetrical internal communication and EORs on positive megaphoning and scouting, but not on negative megaphoning. This indicates that engagement is a key concept that companies should nurture by emphasizing quality communication practice with their employees in order to produce positive communication support. The lack of support on the effects of engagement on negative megaphoning may be explained through the examination of burnout, which is the opposite of employee engagement. According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), burnout is characterized by exhaustion (low activation) and cynicism (low identification). As postulated in this study, cynical employees who do not identify strongly with their organization would be more likely to engage in negative megaphoning behaviors when given the opportunity. However, the two dimensions of burnout, exhaustion and cynicism, might cancel out the active negative communication behaviors of megaphoning, as burnt-out employees do not perceive a need to actively badmouth their employers out of high levels of exhaustion. This suggests that both employee relationships and employee engagement are limited in their ability to predict the likelihood of positive megaphoning behaviors. The concept of empowerment might be relevant to the understanding of such findings. Empowerment is closely linked with the concept of power, and being empowered means to have "a sense of authorization, capacity, and energy" (Kang, 2014, p. 403). Particularly in this research context, the direct sales employees' positions in the organization were probably at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy; hence, their particularly weak sense of empowerment (a sense that they can impact the organization's

ways of doing business) might have been a factor that prevented them from complaining about their jobs to outsiders. Related to this, the insignificant effect of employee engagement on negative megaphoning behaviors is perhaps directly related to the scale of employee engagement chosen (i.e. Schaufeli *et al.*, 2001) with regard to three factors: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Thus, it is possible that the significant role of empowerment on the employee engagement concept was missed (Kang, 2014).

Implications

The study's findings have several implications for effective EOR management. First, employees' communication behaviors such as megaphoning and scouting have special strategic value to organizations. Using this self-propelled information seeking, selecting, forwarding, and sharing behaviors of employees, organizations may obtain or distribute more valuable information than through formal procedures and channels. Active scouting brings important information into the organizations. Also, active positive megaphoning has a very strong effect on the building of organizational reputation and credibility from outsiders. Professional literature (e.g. Edelman's Trust Barometer) has long supported the importance of fostering positive ECBs with empirical data, such as WOM and information from the employees deemed most trustworthy by the public. Ultimately, ECBs about their organizations may be viewed as a testament to the quality of the EOR. This study's results further show that employee engagement plays a key role in creating positive ECBs (i.e. megaphoning and scouting).

In addition, the findings of the study demonstrate that the effects of employee relationship management and symmetrical internal communication indeed extend beyond ECBs to the actual managerial outcomes. The findings also suggest a three-stage model of employee communication management: employee/internal communication management antecedents; employee engagement; and supportive outcomes of effective employee communication programs, such as supportive/extra ECBs.

Pragmatically, as noted in the findings, symmetrical communication is an important factor that leads to positive ECB. To facilitate employees' favorable communication regarding an organization, therefore, the organization needs to practice a two-way, employee-centered symmetrical communication system in its everyday communication management. Communication managers are advised to nurture internal communication practices that listen to the employees and invite their participation in addition to providing complete and fair information to employees.

Second, by showing the significant positive influence of EOR on employee engagement and ECB, the finding of the study suggests that strategic relationship management with internal publics affect overall management effectiveness. Hence, organizational managers need to adopt various relationship cultivation strategies in their communication with employees, which have been previously proposed by several studies.

Future studies

As Grunig (1992) suggested and Kim (2007) empirically found, in addition to symmetrical internal communication, excellent systems of internal/employee communications also have some key antecedents, such as organizational structure (e.g. centralization or formalization) and organizational culture (e.g. participatory culture). Future research can extend the current study on those additional antecedents. Also, other than employee relationship outcomes, future studies may test the effects of employee relationship type (i.e. communal or exchange relationship) or employee relationship cultivation strategies on employee engagement, as suggested by Hon and Grunig (1999), Grunig and Huang (2000), and Shen (2011).

Employee engagement can be conceptualized in different ways: employee burnout (with job/work) or employee cynicism (against organizations/management). Future studies can explore

how different types of employee engagement can be better situated in different antecedents and outcome variables. For example, employee engagement as employee cynicism may be strongly linked with negative ECBs (e.g. negative megaphoning behaviors).

This study has some limitations in that the data are from a single organization, limiting the extent to which one may generalize the results. Therefore, the findings may reflect only the specific situation of this particular company. In addition, the specific nature of the case organization makes the application of the findings to wider contexts challenging; thus, the interpretation of the findings in a different research context should be made with caution. Future research efforts should be directed toward using multiple institutions.

If these conclusions are to be applied to organizations outside Korea, the potential influence of other factors characterizing employee relations and employment first needs to be examined. For example, the results may reflect the societal culture of Korea, which is often characterized by the influence of collectivism (Hofstede, 2001) and confucianism (Huang, 2004). According to Hui *et al.* (1995), collectivist employees tend to report higher satisfaction with their work, pay, promotion, supervision, and coworker than those with individualistic. In Confucian societies, relationships between people, the family tie in particular, are valued and a non-conditional loyalty to one's parents is highly emphasized (Yum, 1988); it is often observed that companies often adopt the concept of family in managing their employees and expect them to support and advocate the organization as if family members do for their family. Besides, the characteristics such as organizational culture and social norms of employment may affect the strength of the relationships between the constructs. Studies with other organizations as the target stimuli would be valuable in broadening the scope of the proposed model's application. The scope of the research should also be expanded to include organizations outside Korea. This work would provide additional evidence for the reliability and validity of the study.

Further, the all-female sample of study participants from the case organization might have influenced the results of the study. Previous studies have shown that individual differences such as gender have significant impacts on justice perceptions (Greenberg and Cohen, 1982; Kahn *et al.*, 1980; Major and Adams, 1983; Major and Deaux, 1982). Gender differences in interpersonal orientations, styles, or goals may lead to different patterns of justice perceptions between men and women (Deaux, 1984; Kahn *et al.*, 1980; Deaux and Major, 1987).

Notes

1. This earlier OPR definition is quite similar to EOR definitions such as that of Tsui and Wang (2002), who defined the EOR as "the formal and informal, the economic, social, and psychological connection between an employee and his or her employer" (p. 78).

2. Later, Schaufeli *et al.* (2001) criticized this approach and argued that employee burnout and engagement are conceptually opposite, and that they need to be measured independently from one another. They noted that "by using the MBI (Maslach Burnout Inventory) for measuring engagement […] it is impossible to study its relationship with burnout empirically since both concepts are considered to be opposite poles of a continuum that is covered by one single instrument, the MBI" (p. 74).

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