

Conceptualization of Framing Theory in Public Relations

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ABSTRACT: This research study provides a comprehensive review of reliable and credible scholarly literature that employs the widely recognized concept of Framing Theory within the field of global public relations. The primary aim of this study is to examine the research status and scholarly prominence of Framing Theory in public relations, while identifying core themes, foundational insights, and existing gaps in prior academic literature. The study adopts a systematic literature review methodology, guided by predefined selection criteria to identify relevant theoretical studies published over a ten-year period, from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2019. In addition, a qualitative synthesis of the findings was conducted to integrate and interpret the results across the selected studies. A rigorous and systematic search was carried out focusing on Framing Theory and international public relations across three major academic databases: ProQuest Central, Web of Science, and Scopus. These databases were analyzed to ensure the inclusion of authentic and peer-reviewed literature addressing the application of framing in public relations. The key findings reveal that while Framing Theory has been widely applied and examined within public relations research, empirical and systematic framing analyses in the field remain relatively limited, indicating the need for further scholarly investigation.

KEYWORDS: Framing Theory; Public Relations; Systematic Literature Review; Media Framing; Strategic Communication; Qualitative Synthesis

I. INTRODUCTION

Framing Theory has been widely examined as a concept with dual intellectual roots, primarily grounded in the fields of psychology and sociology. Early and influential framing studies were largely conducted within the psychological domain, particularly drawing on principles of cognitive psychology, where framing is understood as a mental structure that shapes individuals' perceptions and interpretations of information (Voci et al., 2021). From a psychological perspective, frames are commonly viewed as cognitive constructs embedded in individual memory, influencing how information is processed and recalled. In contrast, sociological scholars emphasize the complexity of social reality and argue that individuals rely on interpretive frames to make sense of relationships among events, actors, and social phenomena. These "thematic frames" enable individuals to organize and understand the world in a structured and meaningful way (Kuan et al., 2021). Over time, Framing Theory has gained increasing prominence within the field of mass communication, particularly through its application in qualitative research methodologies. Previous studies suggest that Framing Theory is closely connected to communication science, as it focuses on selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in communicative contexts in order to promote specific interpretations, evaluations, or solutions (Veg & Cheng, 2021).

Despite its widespread use, several scholars argue that framing research does not yet constitute a fully unified theoretical paradigm nor a clearly standardized methodological approach (Higgins et al., 2019). Instead, framing research encompasses multiple perspectives and analytical strategies, allowing for continuous theoretical development and adaptation across various academic disciplines. Consequently, Framing Theory remains a flexible and evolving framework that can be explored and applied in diverse fields of study. Historically, Framing Theory has been particularly prevalent in mass communication research, and its application has expanded significantly into the field of public relations (Kuan et al., 2021). Within mass communication studies, researchers have focused on how different frames influence audience emotions, attitudes, and behaviors. However, many competing and potentially influential framing approaches remain insufficiently explored, especially in public relations contexts. Public relations, as a discipline, involves the strategic management of communication and information flow between organizations, individuals, and the public. It encompasses processes of message construction, dissemination, and interpretation aimed at shaping public understanding and organizational reputation (Lan, 2018). Due to the complexity of managing relationships with multiple stakeholders, public relations is inherently multidimensional and multifaceted, making it a fertile area for

Framing analysis and theoretical advancement (Wood, 2019). Previous research has demonstrated that framing in public relations is a deliberate process employed by organizations and media practitioners to present messages in ways that encourage specific interpretations. In public relations framing research, scholars often compare organizational frames with media frames to examine how similarities and differences between them influence public perception. This comparative approach allows researchers to assess the extent to which organizational messaging aligns with or diverges from media narratives and how both shape public frames. Moreover, Alaa et al. (2017) emphasize that relatively little is known about the evolving nature of framing practices in competitive and dynamic communication environments. As a research paradigm, Framing Theory represents a family of analytical approaches applied to various communicative texts within broader social and cultural contexts. This theoretical flexibility enables Framing Theory to offer fresh insights across multiple areas of social science research, including public relations (Lan, 2018).

Research Rationale : Despite the growing application of Framing Theory across communication studies, it remains unclear whether the theory has received sufficient scholarly attention and systematic application within the field of public relations, particularly due to the interdisciplinary nature of the discipline. The extent to which Framing Theory has shaped contemporary public relations research remains ambiguous and underexplored. Previous research by Cury (2017) provided a synthesis of framing research in public relations published between 1999 and 2009, offering valuable insights into early theoretical developments. However, this body of work reflects an earlier stage of the field and does not capture more recent theoretical trends, methodological advancements, or evolving applications of Framing Theory in public relations research. Although several scholars have acknowledged limitations and gaps in existing framing studies, it is difficult to fully assess the scope and depth of these gaps without a comprehensive and systematic review of contemporary literature (Wood, 2019). Consequently, there is a clear need for an updated and methodologically rigorous synthesis of research that examines how Framing Theory has been conceptualized and applied in public relations over the past decade. Therefore, this study seeks to conduct a systematic literature review of Framing Theory applications in public relations research published over a ten-year period. By examining recent scholarly work, this research aims to identify emerging theoretical trends, dominant research themes, and existing gaps. Systematically reviewing prior literature enables a clearer understanding of the field's development and provides guidance for future research directions.

Research Questions : This study conducts a comprehensive systematic literature review of research on Framing Theory in public relations published over the past decade in order to identify theoretical developments and application trends. Through this review, the study seeks to address the following research questions:

- To what extent does Framing Theory influence contemporary public relations research and practice?
- How is frame competition examined in public relations studies, and in what ways is it shaped by public interpretation?
- What are the prevailing application trends of Framing Theory in recent public relations research?

In the absence of a systematic review of relevant studies, it is challenging to accurately assess the current state of Framing Theory conceptualization within public relations. This research aims to address this gap by synthesizing scholarly work published during the past ten years, thereby offering a clearer and more structured understanding of the field. The findings are expected to contribute to refining framing research standards in public relations and to provide a useful reference framework for future scholars (Lan, 2018).

Research Aims and Objectives : The primary aim of this study is to identify the focal areas and key concerns of contemporary framing research in public relations. A rigorous and comprehensive overview of existing scholarship cannot be achieved through limited samples or narrative reviews influenced by researcher subjectivity. Traditional literature reviews often rely on selective sources shaped by individual judgment, which may affect objectivity. Moreover, the identification of seminal works and innovative concepts largely depends on the researcher's familiarity with the field (De Bruycker, 2019). To mitigate these limitations and ensure methodological rigor, this study employs a systematic literature review approach with clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Specifically, the objectives of this research are to:

1. Systematically review scholarly studies on Framing Theory in public relations published between 2010 and 2019.
2. Identify dominant theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and research themes within this body of literature.
3. Examine gaps and underexplored areas in framing research related to public relations.

4. Provide evidence-based conclusions that address the study's research questions and inform future research directions.

Framing Theory in Mass Communication : This study begins by clarifying the concept and theoretical foundations of Framing Theory. Previous scholarship indicates that framing originated in psychology, was further developed in sociology, and later became firmly established within the field of mass communication (Appelman & Asmara, 2018).

The literature suggests that definitions of framing can be broadly categorized into four main perspectives. The first category, discussed by Xiaomeng (2017), conceptualizes frames as products shaped by political, social, and economic contexts. From this perspective, frames are not neutral constructs but are influenced by broader structural forces that guide interpretation and meaning-making. The second category emphasizes the interaction between the public and influential institutions. As individuals and groups engage daily with organizations and power structures, these entities attempt to shape beliefs and behaviors through strategic framing. Scholars such as Lan (2018) describe framing as a continuous interpretive and cognitive process, presenting it as a stable paradigm of emphasis, selection, and omission. The third category highlights framing as a journalistic routine through which news is constructed. Reporters rely on established frames to organize information, define relevance, and structure narratives (De Bruycker, 2019). In this sense, framing operates as a professional practice that guides news production.

The fourth category distinguishes between two analytical levels of framing: frame building and frame setting. News frames operate at two interconnected levels—the textual level, which refers to the explicit content of news stories, and the structural level, which concerns the underlying organization and interpretation of that content. As a theoretical paradigm in mass communication, Framing Theory has gained substantial scholarly attention and is often considered an extension of Agenda-Setting Theory. Both theories examine how the media direct public attention toward specific issues. However, while agenda setting focuses on the frequency and salience of issues covered by the media, framing goes further by explaining how issues are presented and interpreted (Xiaomeng, 2017). Framing theory emphasizes the media's role in highlighting certain aspects of an issue while downplaying others, thereby shaping meaning within a broader interpretive context. Over time, framing has gradually evolved into an independent theoretical framework, distinct from agenda-setting theory.

Framing Theory in the Field of Public Relations : Previous studies identify two primary categories of frames in public relations research: communication frames and audience frames (Bartholomé et al., 2017). These categories provide an analytical framework for understanding how public relations scholars conceptualize framing processes. Most framing studies in public relations literature have examined either one-sided frames or dual frames, with more recent research increasingly focusing on one-sided corporate frames (Anderson, 2018). Early framing research largely concentrated on micro-level cognitive processes, emphasizing how individuals process framed messages. While much of the theoretical literature has focused on consumers rather than producers, communication processes have often been underrepresented in framing studies within public relations (Xiaomeng, 2017). Although public relations research includes a substantial body of framing studies, many have failed to address the full range of factors necessary for constructing and sustaining meaning. In particular, these studies often overlook whether a newly introduced frame can withstand strategic counter-responses from competing actors (Wang et al., 2020).

In response, public relations scholars have increasingly adopted dual-framing and counter-framing approaches, focusing on how competing frames interact within news coverage. Time has been recognized as a critical variable in these processes, as frames evolve and compete over extended periods. Consequently, recent studies have examined the longitudinal effects of competing messages and their influence on public opinion. Counter-framing has thus become a central concern in contemporary public relations research. Incorporating counter-framing into analytical models enables scholars to better understand democratic discourse and assists practitioners in strategically deploying frames, particularly in governmental and political public relations contexts. Furthermore, sponsored framing has gained attention, highlighting the need for additional research on the role of powerful actors in shaping the interaction between discourse and frames (Nelson, 2019).

Systematic Literature Review as a Methodological Approach : Systematic literature reviews were initially developed within the healthcare field to synthesize evidence related to specific research questions (Xu & Cao, 2018). The primary objective of this method is to provide a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable synthesis

of existing literature (Wang et al., 2020). Unlike traditional narrative reviews, systematic literature reviews are characterized by methodological rigor, objectivity, and transparency. Their origins date back to the late twentieth century, when scholars established formal guidelines for conducting systematic reviews in medical research (Durach et al., 2017). In recent years, this methodology has been increasingly applied in social sciences, including public relations, social work, and business administration (Higgins et al., 2019). However, due to disciplinary differences, procedures for literature retrieval, selection, and synthesis must be adapted to suit the characteristics of each field (Durach et al., 2017). The literature outlines four essential steps for conducting a systematic literature review. First, clear and focused research questions must be defined. Second, relevant databases must be identified, along with predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria (Alakotila, 2017). Third, a comprehensive and unbiased search must be conducted. Finally, selected studies must be evaluated according to predefined standards to address the research questions (De Bruycker, 2019). To minimize bias, studies are typically drawn from multiple databases, and at least two independent reviewers screen the material. Quantitative synthesis is often excluded when meta-analysis is not suitable. Meta-analyses are designed to identify common effects across comparable studies, such as clinical trials, and are therefore less applicable to theoretical research areas (Higgins et al., 2019).

Given the exploratory and conceptual nature of Framing Theory research in public relations, quantitative meta-analysis is not appropriate. Instead, a qualitative synthesis provides a more suitable approach for capturing theoretical trends, research patterns, and conceptual developments within the field (Nelson, 2019).

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to examine the application of Framing Theory in public relations research. Based on the research theme and objectives, a set of predefined keywords was developed, including *Framing Theory*, *framing analysis*, *framing research*, *application of framing theory*, and *public relations*, combined using Boolean operators (AND/OR) to ensure comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies (Higgins et al., 2019). To maintain methodological rigor and limit the scope to high-quality academic sources, the review focused exclusively on English-language scholarly literature. Three major bibliographic databases were selected due to their comprehensive coverage, accessibility, and relevance to communication and social science research: Web of Science (WoS), Scopus, and ProQuest Central. Web of Science served as the primary database, given its extensive indexing of high-impact journals across social sciences, arts, humanities, and communication studies (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Scopus and ProQuest Central were used as complementary databases to enhance coverage and reduce selection bias (Gong, 2019). ProQuest Central is recognized as a leading multidisciplinary database, while Scopus is regarded as one of the most reliable citation and abstract databases for peer-reviewed scholarly literature (Matingwina, 2019). Although widely used, Google Scholar and IEEE Xplore were excluded from the formal review process. Google Scholar lacks advanced filtering and reproducibility features required for systematic reviews, making consistent screening of titles, abstracts, and keywords challenging (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2017). Nevertheless, it was utilized as a preliminary exploratory tool to identify broad thematic trends. IEEE Xplore was excluded due to its primary focus on computer science and engineering disciplines, which fall outside the scope of this study (Gong, 2019).

Screening and Selection Process : The literature selection followed a three-stage filtering process. In the first stage, irrelevant records were removed based on titles and keywords. The second stage involved abstract screening to eliminate duplicate and unrelated studies. In the final stage, full-text articles were carefully reviewed to ensure relevance, theoretical alignment, and methodological quality (Matingwina, 2019). To identify studies specifically addressing Framing Theory in public relations, search strings combined terms such as “*Framing Theory*” OR “*framing*” AND “*public relations*”, using Boolean operators to capture variations of framing-related research (Higgins et al., 2019).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria : Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the selection of relevant and high-quality studies.

The inclusion criteria required that:

- Studies focus explicitly on public relations and apply Framing Theory as a core theoretical framework;
- Publications be peer-reviewed journal articles or conference papers;
- Studies fall within the publication period 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2019;
- Articles be written in English.

The exclusion criteria eliminated studies that were non-English, conceptually irrelevant, or merely mentioned framing or public relations without integrating them into the research objectives or methodology. The initial search yielded over 500 records (177 from Web of Science, 190 from ProQuest Central, and 150 from Scopus). After removing 22 duplicate articles and applying title and abstract screening, 365 studies remained. Further screening resulted in approximately 130 studies explicitly addressing Framing Theory and public relations. Ultimately, over 80 articles met all inclusion criteria and were retained for qualitative synthesis (Matingwina, 2019).

Studies on Effective Application of Framing Theory

Model Development and Application : One major category of studies focused on developing conceptual and analytical models grounded in Framing Theory for public relations practice. Notably, the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) was applied to enhance understanding of policy communication processes (Jones, 2018). Other studies developed evaluation models linking media frames and organizational frames to improve online news communication and organizational reputation (Matingwina, 2019). Structural equation modeling was also employed to support Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) communication strategies (Bhalla & Overton, 2019).

Application of Framing Theory in Public Relations- The reviewed literature demonstrated diverse applications of Framing Theory across public relations contexts, including strategic communication, crisis management, and reputation management (Bhalla & Overton, 2019).

Framing Analysis in Public Relations Activities

Strategic Communication : Research on strategic communication highlighted the role of framing in enhancing message effectiveness across several domains, including public health communication, media relations, CSR communication, public diplomacy, and international public relations (Bhalla & Overton, 2019). Media framing was shown to influence stakeholder behavior, public interpretation, and political communication strategies (Hopkins, 2018; Sikorski & Müller, 2018).

Public Relations Crisis Management : Framing Theory has been extensively applied to crisis communication research, examining how rational and emotional frames shape public responses to crises (Xifra & Heath, 2018). Studies also explored media framing, social media comment framing, and the linguistic impact of labels in crisis reporting (Kang & Sung, 2017; Matingwina, 2019).

Reputation Management : Framing Theory has been widely used to analyze corporate and national reputation management. Studies examined media framing of CSR initiatives, regional identities, immigration narratives, and national images in international media coverage (Xu & Cao, 2018; Sikorski & Müller, 2018). Framing organizational communication—such as sustainability reports and corporate websites—was found to significantly influence public perception and organizational legitimacy (Betts & Krayem, 2019).

III. RESULTS

In the Results section, the extracted data were examined and systematically organized following the content-summarizing process. The analyzed information was categorized according to key study components, including research objectives, research types, and methodological approaches. An inductive analytical approach was adopted because no hypotheses or prior assumptions were established before conducting the systematic literature review. Following content summarization, the selected studies were reviewed and classified based on their principal characteristics, such as research objectives, study designs, and applied methodologies. The inductive approach enabled patterns and themes to emerge organically from the literature rather than being constrained by predefined theoretical propositions.

Based on the core objectives of public relations research, the reviewed studies can be grouped into four main categories:

1. Action and planning, aimed at designing communication activities with specific purposes;
2. Evaluation, focused on assessing the effectiveness of public relations initiatives;
3. Communication, concerned with disseminating public relations-related messages; and

4. Strategy, which positions public relations as an integral part of an organization's strategic management process.

The major findings of the study indicate that the conceptualization of Framing Theory has been widely applied in interdisciplinary contexts without relying on unified methodological frameworks. Instead, researchers have drawn analytical tools from multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, linguistics, and rhetoric. This methodological diversity offers valuable guidance for future scholars seeking to design interdisciplinary research on framing in public relations. The results further reveal that most studies examining the application of Framing Theory in public relations predominantly employed content analysis. Beyond content analysis, a variety of qualitative and mixed methods were identified, including thematic analysis, discourse analysis, textual analysis, interviews, experimental designs, and focus group discussions. However, the findings also show that many prior studies relied heavily on literature review approaches to identify specific aspects of framing analysis, particularly within the public relations context, rather than advancing new theoretical or longitudinal empirical models.

IV. DISCUSSION

This study systematically reviewed scholarly literature on the application of Framing Theory in public relations research published between January 2010 and December 2019. While earlier literature reviews have primarily focused on healthcare communication and relied heavily on quantitative synthesis, this study provides a comprehensive qualitative synthesis tailored to the public relations domain, without employing meta-analytic techniques. The primary objective of this research was to offer an inclusive examination of Framing Theory applications in public relations by identifying research trends, thematic classifications, and existing gaps. The findings confirm that framing plays a central and influential role in public relations research. It has been widely used to assess attitudes, behavioral intentions, and communicative outcomes, and several framing models have been proposed to support public relations practices. The review demonstrates that framing in public relations operates across three interrelated domains: organizational frames, media frames, and public frames. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of public relations, studies grounded in sociology tend to focus on frame construction, psychology-based research emphasizes framing effects, and mass communication scholarship concentrates on frame content and themes.

Despite a noticeable shift in recent years toward examining frame competition and strategic framing in public relations, most studies remain limited to horizontal analyses. As noted by Appelman and Asmara (2018), "*little is known about the dynamic nature of framing in competitive contexts.*" Longitudinal studies could therefore provide deeper insight into how frames evolve over time and interact within public relations environments. This review contributes to the literature by synthesizing the most relevant studies on Framing Theory applications in public relations and highlighting prevailing research directions. Although the scope of the review is broad, it focuses more on framing applications than on the framing process itself. The taxonomic approach adopted in this study serves two important purposes: first, it provides emerging scholars with a comprehensive overview of the field; second, it organizes prior research into a structured and manageable framework. The findings further reveal that the majority of framing-related public relations studies focus on stakeholder communication, while relatively few examine framing effects or frame-building processes. Another notable gap is the limited development of theoretical refinements, as empirical studies significantly outnumber theoretical contributions.

Overall, the results underscore the need for more rigorous theoretical engagement in framing research within public relations. Future studies should pay closer attention to frame construction processes, the actors responsible for creating frames, the contextual conditions under which frames are developed, and their differential impacts on audiences. Addressing these dimensions will strengthen both public relations scholarship and the broader theoretical foundations of Framing Theory.

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Appendix

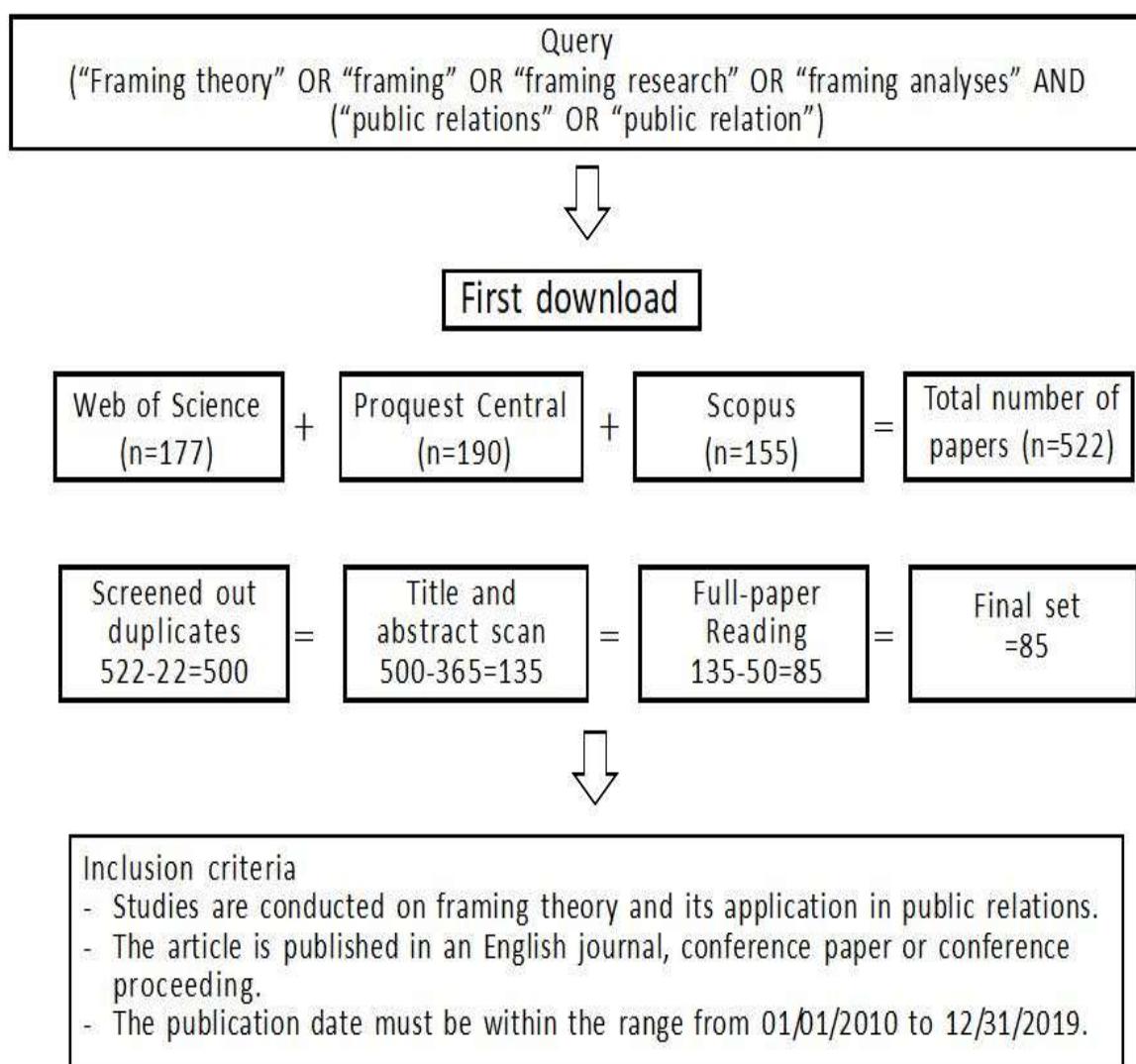


Figure 1. Flowchart of study selection, including search query and inclusion criteria

Figure 1: Flowchart of Study

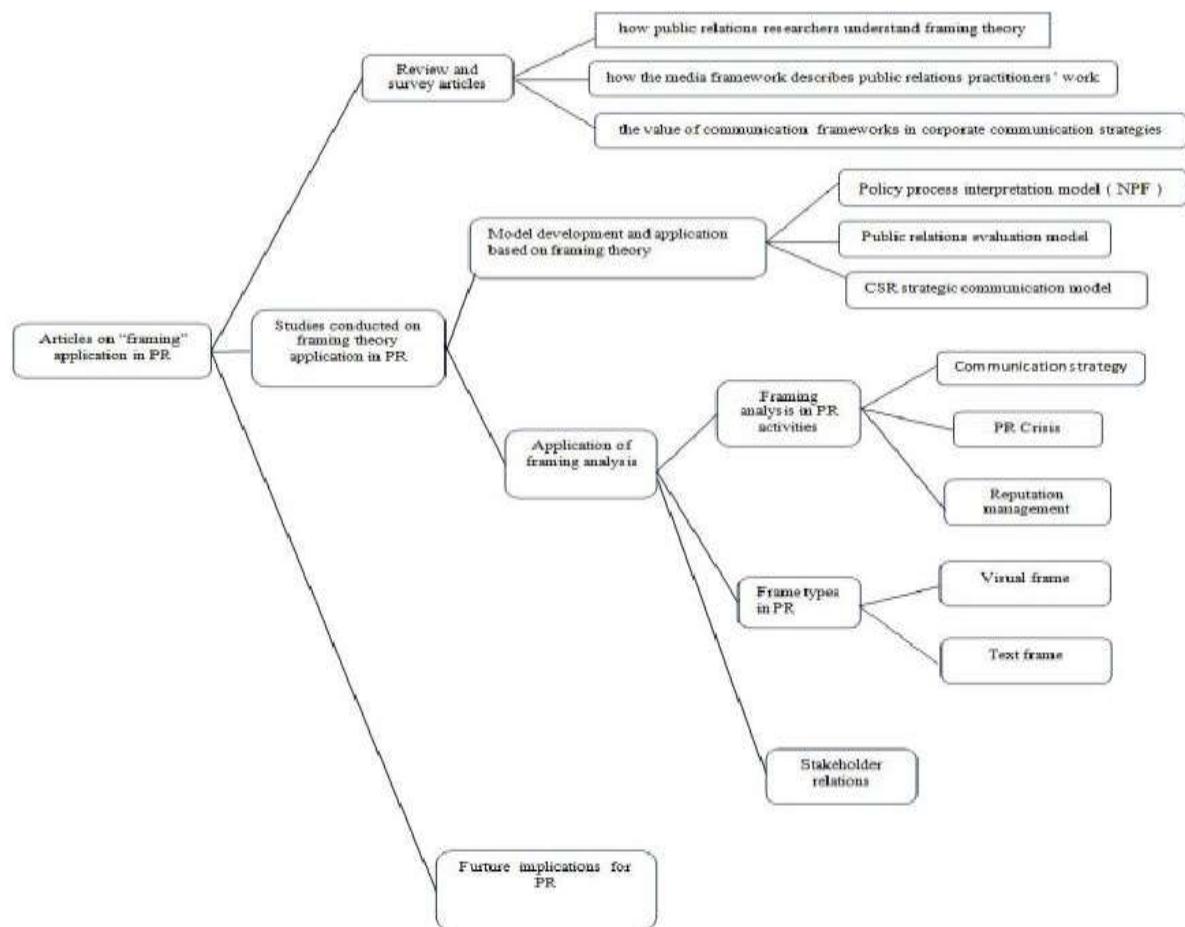


Figure 2. Classification on Framing theory applications

Figure 2: Frame Theory Applications

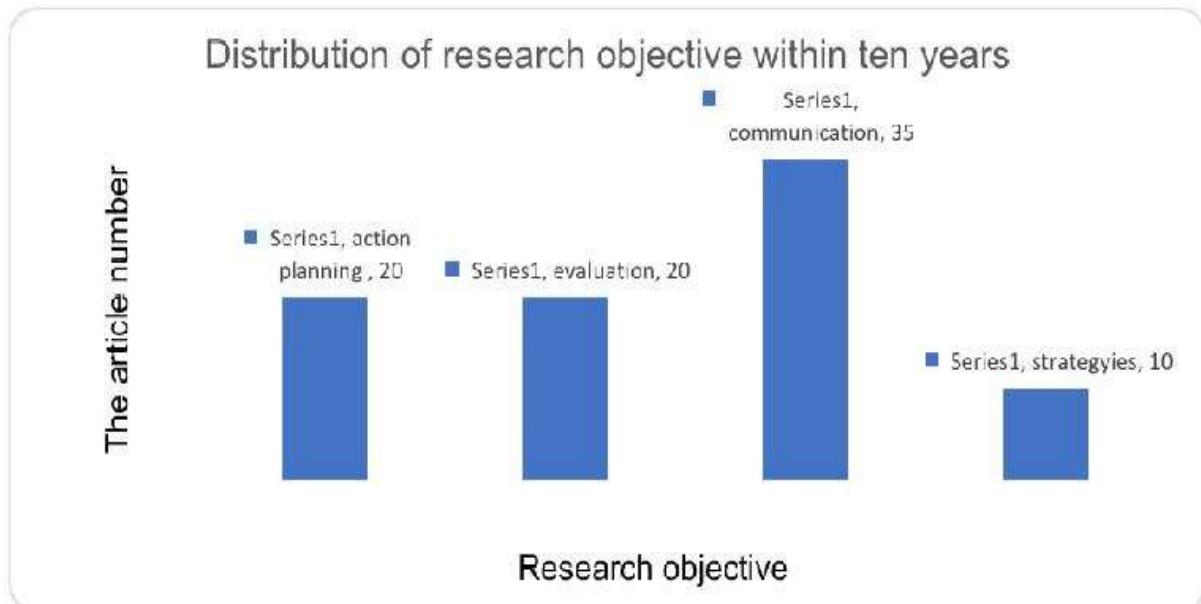


Figure 4. Distribution of research objectives (2010-2019)

Figure 3: Research Objectives