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## The Relevance of Theory to Communication Research

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### ABSTRACT

This conceptual discourse was concerned with the relevance of theory to communication research. It has made the position that there is no theory-free communication researches. This is due to the inalienable fact that without working or existing theories, communication researches tend to have no empirical scaffold, foothold, and anchor upon which the falsifiability of their outcomes can be contested against theoretical conjectures. Hence, theories are critical analytical tools deployed as theoretical frameworks or foundations in communication researches to order research information into intelligible patterns by explicating the nexus between/among research elements and also specifying why certain research outcomes turn out in some way. The relevance of theories in communication researches are underscored by the notion that they are instrumental in guiding researchers in sense making; providing research directions; and establishing the ground norms for analysis, interpretation, discussion, and explanation of research outcomes. In consideration of theories' utility in firming interpretive, descriptive, explanatory, informatory, predictive, disruptive, and falsifiable paradigms in communication researches, their relevance are considered to be immitigable, profound, and far reaching. These, in the estimation of the author, are the justifications for their wide adoption in communication researches.

### INTRODUCTION

Theory-free communication researches do not exist (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). This implies that there is hardly any communication research without the application of a working or existing theory. This is underscored by the fact that without working or existing theories, communication researches tend to have no empirical anchor upon which the falsifiability of the research outcomes and theoretical conjectures can be contested. Hence, theories are supposed to support communication researches in sense making approaches that pertains to the analyses, interpretations, and discussions of observed communication evidence and phenomena (Targema, Obong, & Akpan, 2023). Especially, if such research phenomena or variables are tied to theoretical foundations on presumed media effects on media audience (Obong & Targema, 2023)

Theories are basically deployed or applied to provide communication researches with theoretical frameworks or foundations upon which their outcomes can be validated or refuted. This is in consideration of the fact that a theoretical framework puts communication researches at the intersection of existing knowledge and previously formed ideas about complex communication phenomena where the researcher's epistemological dispositions and methodically analytic approach renders theory a valuable tool to the coherence and depth of a communication research (Collins & Stockton, 2018).

Application of theories to communication researches is to provide foothold and scaffold upon which the variables embedded in communication researches can be explicated to specify the relationships that exist among the variables/phenomena investigated.

Baran (2004) clearly posits that theories and their application to communication researches form the basis to understanding the causality between communication research variables especially on how communication research variables affect one another.

Given the utility value of a theory, it is risky for communication researchers to assume that it should not be tied to or linked with their research efforts. The justification to this is simple: communication researches depend on theories to derive their theoretical foundations (or frameworks) upon which the foothold of the research can rest. Beyond establishing a foothold, theories, in themselves, when functionally or critically applied to a communication researches aim to inform and clarify the particular communication patterns being observed (Kogan & Hanney, 2000).

In simpler terms, theories when adopted or applied to communication research seek to validate the findings of a communication research and as well, provide the basis for a critical discourse analysis on whether the findings of a communication research can be grounded in line with the tenet, ideal, highlight or position of the theories being drafted as its (research's) theoretical support or base. This implies that theories are not just adopted as mere abstractual statements or use traditionally to fill allotted or designated space in communication researches but rather they have functional and epistemic value to the process and outcome of communication researches.

Moreover, communication researches, based on the findings they yield, always seek, though latently in most circumstances, to either clarify, inform or serve as referents to the claims, tenets, ideals or highlights of the theories drafted to support their theoretical bases. In this context, application of theories to communication research seeks to establish the relevance, relationship, and nexus between the variables of the communication research and the theories being adopted. It is at such hindsight that answers to the following questions become imperative: how related and relevant are the theories adopted to the variables of communication phenomena under investigation? Can the propositions of the theories be linked to or verified by the findings of the study? Are the results of communication researches supported by the tenets, positions, claims, ideals or highlights of the theories adopted? What new insights or gaps have been observed as a result of the application of theories to the findings of the communication research? Are the theories strong enough to explicate, interpret, and predict the outcome of the research: if yes, to what extent and if no, why not? Can they establish the relationship among the variables and show how one variable affects another?

Answers to the above questions cannot be attempted without one making significant reference and cognitive mapping on the functional relevance of theories to communication researches. By being functionally relevant, theories adopted in research must have the potency to order information (data gathered and evaluated evidence) into an intelligible pattern with relationships between each variable made clear (Udoakah, 2002). Consequently, communication researchers adopt theories in communication researches by searching for patterns of uniformity to explain their data and the consistency in behaviour, situation, and phenomena pertaining to the variables of their researches (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

However, resourceful and knowledgeable communication researchers who have firm grasp of the functionality of theories to communication researches hardly adopt theories blindly neither do they treat issues pertaining to the applicability of theories to their researches haphazardly. In adopting a theory to form a theoretical framework, foundation or base to a communication research, the key principles worth considering are whether the ideal, proposition, position, tenet, claim or highlight of the theory is related and relevant to the constructs, variables, and concepts embedded in the research; whether the theory has explanative power in explicating the nexus or relationship between the variables of the research; whether the theory is descriptive enough to provide basis for critical discourse on the outcome of the variables being empirically tested and whether the theory can open up the researchers' vistas to predict further outcomes that are implicative to their present study.

Thus, the underlying principles for setting a theoretical framework in any communication research should be based on: relevance and relatedness as well as being overtly explanative, heuristic, interpretive, and descriptive of the variables, constructs, and the data (observed, gathered, and evaluative data) of the research. Nothing more; nothing less pretentious. Adoption and application of a theory to a communication research with strict adherence to these principles implies that such adoption and application is functional and practical in approach.

On the other hand, where the principles stated above are not adhered to when adopting theories to set up the theoretical framework of a research, one should see such attempt as traditional approach. Traditional in the sense that, the researcher, as occasion demands, only enlist theories to serve as theoretical framework in his or her communication research because it is demanded for such to be provided. To this end, the researcher may 'copy and paste' anything in the similitude of a theory and add some statements to justify that he or she has indeed adopted theories when in depth, the theories are not related or relevant in explicating the outcome of the communication research talk less of establishing the nexus between the variables.

The pretense that shallow treatment of theories in communication researches can provide a framework for variables, concepts or constructs as well as substantially providing discourse base for data interpretation and sense making in view of drawing inference should be discarded. It is allusive to a house that cannot firmly stand without its foundational pillars. Hence, relatedness and relevance as well as explanative, interpretive, descriptive, and heuristic potentials are the cardinal pillars for setting a theory as a theoretical framework in communication researches.

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

### Theory: Contextual Meanings and Perspectives

There are varied definitions, meanings, and perspectives of a theory offered by varied intellectual quarters. One of the foremost and time tested definition of a theory is provided by Kerlinger (1986) who posits that a theory is a set of propositions that are logically related which express the relationship between/among several or different constructs, concepts, variables, and propositions. Varpio, Paradis, Uijtdehaage, and Young (2020, p.990) say that “a theory is an abstract description of the relationships between concepts that help us to understand the world.”

According to Wilson, Esiri, and Onwubere, (2008, p.5), a theory is “a tentative explanation invented to assist in understanding some small or large part of the reality around us” or “a set of interrelated propositions or generalisations that serve to organise selected aspects of the world in a systematic way.” McQuail (2010, p. 5) sees a theory as “a general proposition, itself based on observation and logical argument, that states the relationship between observed phenomena and seek either to explain or to predict the relation, in so far as this is possible.”

Some key themes in Kerlinger’s (1986); Varpio’s, et al (2020); Wilson’s, et al (2008); and McQuail’s (2010) definitions of a theory are very sacrosanct in giving bearing to the contextual focus of this discourse. The first key theme is that a theory is a general proposition (statement) that is based or derived from observation (case studies and experimentation) and logical argument (syllogism, logic, and reasoning). This implies that what is considered as a theory must be subjected to empiricism and not arrived at haphazardly or through randomisation of thoughts, processes or both. It follows an empirical and systematic methods to observe or understudy phenomena and thereby build testable statement about the observation. Hence, it is “any systematic set of ideas that can help make sense of a phenomenon, guide action or predict a consequence...” (McQuail & Deuze, 2020, p.33).

The second key theme stresses that a theory (when adopted in communication research) states or shows the relationship or nexus that exists between communication phenomena (empirical variables, concepts or constructs). This implies that a theory establishes causal relationship between communication research variables. Hence, it shows how variable X relates with variable Y in communication research by explaining or establishing the connecting points between the variables and predicting their outcomes or consequences.

The third key theme about a theory (when adopted in research) is anchored on the premise that it aims to explain or predict the relationship that exists between the communication variables investigated and their consequent outcomes or results. This theme brings alive the fact that theories are able to predict communication research outcomes or results and as a consequence, explain why the outcomes/results turn out the way they do. This is the hallmark of adopting theories in researches.

### What then is Communication Research?

To get at the meaning of communication research, it is pertinent to whet the appetite with the meaning of research first before we delve into what communication research entails. Basically, research is a deliberate attempt aimed at discovering facts, solving a problem, or arriving at a dependable solution to either an observed problem or an envisaged one (Nwagbara, 2006).

Osuala (2005, p.1) defines research as “the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through the planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data.” “To research is to search again, to take another, more careful look, to find out more” (Sellhz, Wrightsman, and Cook, 1976 cited in Ajala, 1996, p.1). Okafor (2000, p. 171) considers research as “any organised enquiry that is aimed at providing information for solving identified problems.” Kothari and Garg, (2014, p.1) see it as “a scientific and systematic search for pertinent information on a specific topic.”

Having looked at the various definitive perspectives of research, we can vehemently say that communication research is the quantitative or qualitative study conducted by communication scholars about communication phenomena. It falls within the domain of social science research, which is based on the assumption that research can be used to uncover the behavioural patterns in communication systems, patterns, structures, forms, processes, and contents that affect or influence people’s lives (Obong, 2021; Sam & Obong, 2024).

Though, most scholars mistake communication research for media or mass communication research, they are markedly different in significant ways. Communication research is expansive, extensive, and integrative in approach, nature, scope, and boundary compared to media research and mass communication research. Mass communication research is a dedicated research approach specifically designated to the study of media channels, mass-mediated content processes and media delivery systems cases/problems (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Media research is the dedicated research approach and application of scientific methodologies to the study of the functioning of the mass media radio, TV, newspapers, magazine, etc. (Wilson, et al., 2008).

Hence, communication research is an all-encompassing research approach that transcend its empirical boundary from human communication, mass communication, to mass media. It deals with the empirical investigation into cases/problems that affect communication in all its forms, and totality including advertising, public relations, rhetorics, interpersonal communication, mediated communication and other composite fields of communication (Batta, 2019).

### Goals of Communication Research

The primary goal of communication research is to describe, discover, and explain the relationships that exist among communication phenomena. To put differently, the communication research process is all about discovery and explanation. Communication research process, if approached systematically, can have one of the following four results: describe communication behaviour; determine causes of communication behaviour; explain communication behaviour; and predict communication behaviour.

Predicting communication behaviour, for instance, entails predicting outcomes, processes or ways in which communication variables are related to one another. For instance, research can help to predict how an individual is likely to react if he/she is exposed to an advertisement in the mass media. If the researcher can predict the likely communication behaviour of the potential recipient of the advertising message, such prediction would help the originator of such message to know how to couch the message in a way that would elicit the envisaged response from a larger target audience. The researcher could use theories to present the procedures he or she would take in presenting the message to achieve the desired result.

Communication researchers aim to use both quantitative method (which is objective) and qualitative method (which is subjective) to discover the patterns of human communication behaviour (Sam & Obong, 2024). This means that both research methods are based on observations or experiences of communication situations and both types of research methods are needed because it is very unlikely that only quantitative or qualitative method can provide complete answers to the many questions people have about communication behaviours or patterns in their societies (Sam & Obong, 2024).

### Theory and Communication Research: The Nexus

Theory and research are inter-related. The nexus between a theory and communication research is in consideration of the fact that while theory guides the research process, research, in turn, provides a test in which theoretical assumptions are falsified (Wilson, et al., 2008). The nexus is so intricate that one can hardly function without the other.

Hence, theories when used in communication researches aim to provide critical guide; set problems; identify new subjects for investigation; direct research enquiry while research on the other hand performs the roles of suggesting new problems; inviting new theoretical formulation; and leading to final retirement of theories themselves (Wilson, et al., 2008)

According to Saldana and Omasta (2018, p.257), a theory condenses research into propositions bothering on “social life that holds transferable applications to other settings, contexts, populations, and possibly time periods.” On the intricate nexus between theory and communication research, Wilson, et al., (2008) note that:

Because this relationship is so important, the most important step in social science research (of which communication research is a part) is that of linking the research to a theoretical problem. Unless the research is directly tied to a problem in theory, it is of little value or use. Ultimately the accumulation of greater knowledge is the final outcome of both theory and research (p.5).

In a broader perspective of theory and its functional nexus to communication researches, Anumihe (2007, p.2) says that a “theory is a whole set of fact, principles, propositions scientifically, objectively and systematically analysed according to their differences and relationships to one another and used to explain the phenomena called communication in the totality of its universal manifestations.” From the above assertion, theories are sets of abstract postulations and generalised statements made about communication phenomenon in order to explain, interpret, represent, predict or clarify such communication phenomenon.

The aim of theories is to crystalise concepts in communication researches and predict future outcomes of such research concepts. It follows that for a theory to be called theory, it must be interpretive and explanative enough to blast ambiguity shrouding communication research elements such as concepts, variables, constructs, and phenomena. This specifically includes showing a linkage between the communication research elements, the research process and the research outcomes/results.

### New Insights on the Application of Theory to Communication Research: A Discourse between the Functional and the Traditional Approach

Theories, based on their application to communication researches, serve two broad purposes: functional and traditional purposes. A theory serves functional purpose in a communication research when its application and utilisation in the research is deeply tied to the intricate parts of the research from problem formulation, statement of the research problem, analysis of research discourse to predicting outcomes or results.

Such theoretical application or utilisation serve to explicate the relationships between the communication variables or phenomena empirically tested; interpret the consequences or implications of the outcome, results or findings of the communication research; predict outcomes, results or findings related to the communication research; provide the highlights of the theories as bases for critical discourse on certain outcomes, results or findings of the communication research; as well as examine why certain outcomes, results or findings turn out in some way other than the predictory inclinations the theories hypothesised or prognosticated. Hence, a theory is functionally applied to a communication research when its ideals, positions, highlights, and prognostications are used as bases to vent knowledge about research discourse. This implies theories serving their utility function/purpose in communication research.



On the other hand, a theory is applied traditionally when its adoption or use is basically to fulfill the demand of actually having a theory reviewed in a research. This kind of adoption is basically to meet the requirement and expectation of a research segment designated as 'Theoretical Framework' in communication researches. As it is customary that a segment in communication researches should be designated 'Theoretical Framework', it has become a near must that such segment be treated with theoretical inputs or substances from related or relevant theories. In this fashion, it is common practice for most rookie, amateur, and lazy researchers to start and stop the discussion of a theory in such segment. After a theory has been listed and its tenets, stated, some communication researchers make no attempt to link the theory to critical components and process of their research. In refusing, out of laxity or ignorance to link the theory to critical components and process of their research, the theory as used fail to explicate the communication variables, interpret phenomena, predict outcomes/results, discuss findings, explain consequences, and show relationships between variables of the communication research. This kind of trite application of theory to communication researches is considered traditional because the researchers consider using theories as a demand place on them by their research discipline and not a necessity to provide explications to the critical components and process of their researches.

### **The Relevance of Theories to Communication Researches**

Theories are relevant to communication researches. Their relevance to communication researches are multi-dimensionally significant and profound. This is in consideration of the fact that theories set and establish the theoretical crust and scaffold upon which the variables, concepts, and constructs of communication research inquiry can have a foothold. By deploying existing theories in communication researches, a theoretical framework of analysis is established. It is such theoretical framework that seeks to provide explications on the variables and constructs used in communication researches in ways that predict a possible nexus or variance existing between/among them.

Hence, the main relevance of a theory in communication research are to make sense of an observed reality in the field of communication and guide the communication researcher in collection and evaluation of evidence (McQuail, 2010). The foregoing remark as postulated by McQuail (2010) buttresses tripartite relevance for using or applying theories in communication researches which include: making sense of communication phenomena being investigated; providing bearing or directions to communication researchers on how to collect data pertaining to communication phenomena under investigation; and providing the ground norm on how results obtained from investigation of communication phenomena can be analysed, interpreted, and discussed.

From the foregoing, it can be asserted that theories being used in communication researches serve three layers of inter-linked epistemic relevance being discussed as follows:

1. **Sense Making of Communication Research Phenomena:** The first epistemic layer of the relevance of theory to communication researches is tied to the ability of theories to aid communication researchers in sense making approach in communication research process. This implies guiding communication researchers in building a body of reasonable knowledge out of the observable realities (demographic, psychographic, and psycho-social communication data, concepts, variables or constructs) in the course of or aftermath the communication research efforts.
2. **Providing Bearing on how to collect Data pertaining to Communication Research Phenomena:** The second epistemic layer of relevance of theory to communication researches is deeply rooted in the collection of evidence. Here, theories provide communication researchers frame of references for collecting or gathering communication evidence (data). In behavioural and experimental studies, certain conditions to explicate behaviour and attitude are guided by the ideals of a working theory so that the behaviour and attitude the researchers attempt to measure/observe cannot be taken out of context.
3. **Providing Evaluative Paradigm for Research Outcomes on Communication Phenomena Investigated:** The third epistemic layer of relevance of theory to communication researches is bothered on evaluation of evidence. Here, theories provide the necessary framework, underpinning, and foothold for analysing, interpreting, and discussion of the observed evidence (data) by specifying relationships among the variables/phenomena tested or investigated. It is at such prism that the meaning of a theory as "a set of related propositions that presents a systematic view of phenomena by specifying relationships among concepts" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011, p. 13) is substantiated.

Beyond the above tripartite main relevance of theory to communication researches, other generic relevance of theory to communication researches also subsist. These kinds of generic relevance are derivable based on the generic nature of theories and communication researches. Inspiring this thinking are the perceived general perspectives that theories, when applied to communication researches, aim to play certain critical roles which include but not limited to the idea that they are 'theorempirically' (theoretical and empirical insinuations):

- i. **Interpretive:** In communication researches, theories serve as interpretive tools. Theories elucidate empirical data gathered in the course of conducting communication researches. Without theories, data collected and analysed will hang in the balance without interpretive paradigm to offer insights needed to situate them within context of the empirical inquiry.
- ii. **Descriptive:** This implies theories doing the 'naming' and 'characterising' of phenomena in communication researches. This entails providing descriptions on communication research variables, concepts, constructs, and elements. Hence, as Varpio, et al (2020, p.993) note, "the theoretical framework offers a description of which elements of the study are theory informed and how they are informed."

- iii. **Explanatory:** Theories have explanatory power. This entails theories ‘clarifying’ the relationships between communication research phenomena in order to intensify research experience. Theories used in communication researches provide explanations on the justification for conducting the researches in the selected context, research question(s), and justification for the research methodology chosen (Varpio, et al, 2020).
- iv. **Informatory:** Theories inform the entire communication research process (Varpio’s, et al, 2020). They shape and influence critical stages of communication research process from the development of a research question, designing of the research methodologies, data collection, data analysis, and conclusion of the research (Yin, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Stewart and Klein, 2016). The foregoing entails theories seeking to inform our understanding of a plethora of phenomena in communication researches.
- v. **Predictive:** This entails theories ‘predicting’ an outcome of communication research based on specific research inputs. Varpio’s, et al, (2020) are of the view that the utility of theories are in their abilities to be used in predicting, testing hypotheses, or explaining communication research phenomena.
- vi. **Falsifiable, testable, and refutable:** The hallmark and criteria of all theories applied to communication researches are their falsifiability, refutability, or testability of the research outcomes. This implies withstanding scientific rigour, empiricism, and systematic procedures by means of testable refutations. Theories provide the bases for communication outcomes to either be validated or refuted on the grounds of ‘scientificity’ of established and proven theoretical postulations and conjectures vice versa. On this, Popper (1957, pp.13-14) maintains that:  

The principle of empiricism can be fully preserved, since the fate of a theory, its acceptance or rejection, is decided by observation and experiment: by the result of tests. So long as a theory stands up to the severest tests we can design, it is accepted; if it does not, it is rejected. But it is never inferred, in any sense, from the empirical evidence. There is neither a psychological nor a logical induction. Only the falsity of the theory can be inferred from empirical evidence, and this inference is a purely deductive one. Hume showed that it is not possible to infer a theory from observation statements; but this does not affect the possibility of refuting a theory by observation statements. The full appreciation of this possibility makes the relation between theories and observations perfectly clear.
- vii. **Validity and Reliability of Empirical Knowledge:** Theories are relevant in communication researches in the sense that they tend to establish the validity and reliability of research outcomes with theoretical conjectures in diverse empirical contexts. Marton (2005) maintains that the relevance of a theory in (communication) research can only be attainable when the researcher attempts to test the theory in an applied research environment to see whether such theories actually do make the outcome of the research valid and reliable across contexts. Hence, as Liedman (1978, p.31) puts it, if empirical observation in communication researches is put forward without the backing of a theory, then all a communication researcher has is “unsorted pieces of reality.” Theories govern the validity and reliability of empirical knowledge.
- viii. **Disruptive:** This entails theories seeking to ‘extend’, ‘advance’, or ‘refute’ existing knowledge in communication research. Application of theories to communication researches could provide a satisfying advancement of research knowledge and also help in designing and formulating better empirical representations (Emanuel, 2020).
- ix. **Emancipatory:** This implies theories ‘articulating’ communication research phenomena in certain ways.

## CONCLUSION

The relevance of theories to communication researches are profound and far reaching. This work has demonstrated that there is no theory-free communication researches. This is due to the inalienable fact that without working or existing theories, communication researches tend to have no empirical scaffold, foothold, and anchor upon which the falsifiability of their outcomes can be contested against theoretical conjectures. Hence, theories are critical analytical tools deployed as theoretical frameworks or foundations in communication researches to order research information into intelligible patterns by explicating the nexus between/among research elements and also specifying why certain research outcomes turn out in some way.

The relevance of theories in communication researches are underscored by the notion that they are instrumental in guiding researchers in sense making; providing research directions; and establishing the ground norms for analysis, interpretation, discussion, and explanation of research outcomes. In consideration of theories’ utility in firming interpretive, descriptive, explanatory, informative, predictive, disruptive, and falsifiable paradigms in communication researches, their relevance are considered to be immitigable, profound, and far reaching. These are the justifications for their wide adoption in communication researches.

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