

# Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS): A Foundational Theory of Publics and It's Application in an Eastern Cultural Context

Chen Xuemei<sup>1,2</sup>, Norliana Binti Hashim<sup>3</sup>, Syafila Binti Kamarudin<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. student in Mass Communication, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, University Putra Malaysia, Malaysia, <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Faculty of Film and Television Art, Hebei Academy of Fine Arts, China, <sup>3</sup>Senior Lecturer, Communication Department, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia, <sup>4</sup>Senior Lecturer, Communication Department, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia  
Email: gs62452@student.upm.edu.my, gs62452@student.upm.edu.my, h\_norliana@upm.edu.my, syafila@upm.edu.my

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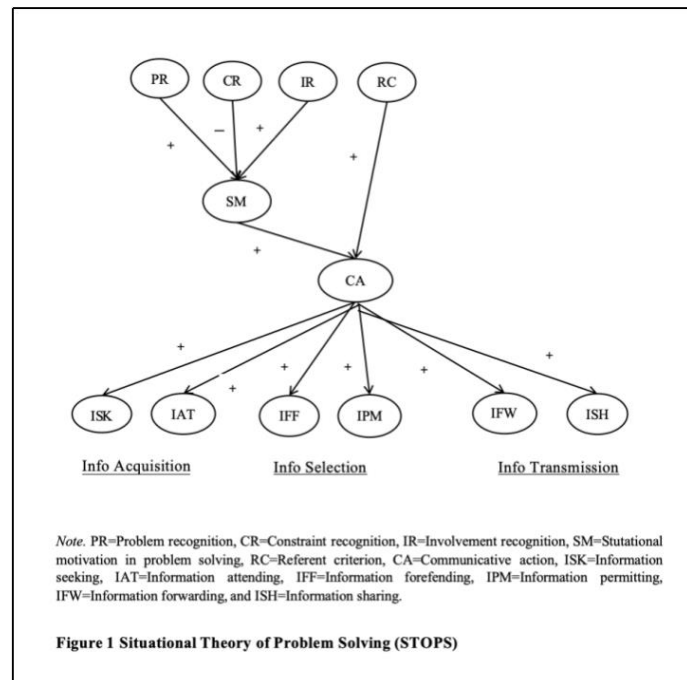
## Abstract

In order to adapt to the pace of the development of the times, in 2006, the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) was developed based on the Situational Theory of Publics. The concept of the Situational Theory of Publics is expanded by the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), especially the concept of the dependent variable of communicative action (Kim, 2006; Kim & Ni, 2013). The situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) has deeply developed the perspective and characteristics of public problem recognition and explained people's communication behavior based on different situations (Kim, 2006). It describes the methods people employ to solve problems cognitively and through communication. It is also feasible to distinguish publics based on their cognitive philosophies and communication behaviors, which allows for a more thorough segmentation of publics (Ni & Kim, 2009). According to Kim and Grunig (2011), developed the comprehensive of Situational Theory of Publics (STP) between problem solving and communication. STOPS directs the strategic development of public relations practice through an understanding of the factors that drive individuals to communicate in favor of or against organizations. However, STOPS is a communication theory developed within the context of Western culture. The application of STOPS in an Eastern cultural context should consider the role of Antecedent Factors. These antecedent variables are included to increase the theory's capacity to explain certain issues. This study focus on discuss the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), and the application in an Eastern cultural context.

**Keywords:** STP, STOPS, Eastern Cultural Context, Antecedent Factors

**Introduction**

Kim and Grunig (2011) created the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) to elaborate on the theoretical principles of the Situational Theory of Publics (STP). The dependent variables information processing and information seeking from STP were combined into information seeking, comprehensive measure was named communicant activeness in problem solving (CAPS). The principles used in situational theory of problem solving, particularly to explain communication behaviors, will be covered in the next section.



**Concepts in the Situational Theory of Problem Solving**

The Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) includes four independent variables: problem recognition, involvement recognition, constraint recognition, and reference criterion. The first three variables are retained from the Situational Theory of Publics (STP). In addition, situational motivation in problem solving is a moderating variable. The dependent variable is Communicative Action in Problem Solving (CAPS), which is a second-order variable that is divided into three dimensions: Information selection (information forefending and information permitting), Information transmission (information forwarding and information sharing), and Information acquisition (information seeking and information attending).

According to Grunig (1997, p.10), problem recognition in the Situational Theory of Publics (STP) is defined as “people detect that something should be done about a situation and stop to think about what to do.” However, in the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), Kim and Grunig (2011:12) refined this definition to “one's perception that something is missing and that there is no immediately applicable solution to it.” “Problem recognition” in STOP was separated into new “problem recognition” and a mediating variable (situational motivation in problem solving). This definition was put forth as a superior choice that addressed the multicollinearity issue brought on by the earlier paradigm.

According to Kim and Grunig (2011:12), constraint recognition and level of involvement are still conceptualized as they were originally described in the Situational Theory of Publics. In the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), the meaning of constraint recognition was

kept the same as in the Situational Theory of Publics. This refers to the belief that there are constraints in a circumstance that limit an individual's ability to take actions regarding the situation (Grunig, 1997). In the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), the level of involvement in the Situational Theory of Publics (STP) was transformed into involvement recognition, which is defined as "a perceived connection between the self and the problem situation" (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

The situational motivation is a new concept in Problem Solving which measures the intention to "stop to think about the problem" (Kim & Ni, 2010). The Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) is a conceptual framework using immediate action to communicate the problem recognition, constraint recognition, and involvement recognition variables. According to Kim, Ni, Kim and Kim (2012), Situational Motivation can be defined as, "the state of increased cognitive and epistemic readiness to reduce differences between expected and experiential states" (Kim et al., 2012).

The Situational Theory of Publics defines referent criterion as "a solution carried forward from previous situations to a new situation" (Grunig, 1997). In mid-1980s, however, due to inconclusive empirical findings, this variable was removed from the situational theory (Aldoory & Sha, 2007). Many scholars have carried out different degrees of empirical research on this variable and put forward constructive ideas and conceptual definitions. Sriramesh (2007) believed that different cultural background factors are important aspects of referent criterion and re-established a new conceptual definition (Sriramesh et al., 2007). Since studies using referent criterion have mainly been conducted in the United States (e.g Grunig & Disbrow, 1977; Grunig, 1997), out from United States, there are much scholars research on study, based on their own culture, such as Asia, should take up their call for reconsideration of this variable. In order to better understand how referent criterion, affect Asian publics' communication behavior, more studies should be conducted. Kim and Grunig (2011) defined reference criterion as "anybody of information or system of opinions that shapes how one solves problems". STOPS reintroduces referent criterion with the consideration of its potential power for explaining communication behaviors (Kim & Grunig, 2011).

This section aims to elucidate the independent variables of STOPS, as well as its mediating variable. The discussion introduces a novel concept called situational motivation in problem solving and presents new ways of conceptualizing problem recognition and referent criterion.

### **Communicant Activeness in Problem Solving**

The Situational Theory of Publics (STP) only have one communicative behavior which is acquire information and divided into information seeking and information processing. The Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) added another two concept of communicative behaviors which are information selection and information transmission. Kim (2006) stated that "The theoretical assumption of CAPS is that we use communicative behaviors to cope with problematic situation".

CAPS explains the picture when publics encounter problematic situation, from "information acquisition", "information selection" to "information transmission" eventually solve recognized problems. Following the expansion of the Situational Theory of Publics, the concept of communicative action was introduced, which includes information acquisition, information selection, and information transmission. The following subheadings will discuss each component of CAPS.

### **Information Selection**

Kim (2006) mentioned that selecting information to solve problems is an integral part of managing information. Data overload can be reduced, and problems can be solved using it. When one is more actively involved in solving a problem, one is more likely to be selective in the information he or she takes, processes, and gives. Information taking varies as people deal with their daily life. In seeking closure to a problematic situation, one's selectivity increases when a problem is perceived to be important. In contrast, when there is little disparity in people's daily routines, they are more willing to take in information. According to Kim (2006), information selection is "the extent to which specificity evolves from general to specific, from related to relevant in dealing with data corresponding to a communicant's activeness".

According to Kim (2006), information selection divides into high and low states. A high state of information selection is used by active communicators and problem solvers, whereas a low state of information selection is used by passive communicators and problem solvers. Information forefending refers to people's pre-evaluation of the value and relevance of the solution to a particular problem and their refusal to accept certain information.

As people increase their screening and testing of information, their understanding of information will continue to deepen, and their processing of information will become more specific and explicit, and they will no longer blindly receive irrelevant information. "Information permitting" means that people remain open to receiving any information related to solving a problem. Generally, in the early stages of problem solving, the higher the motivation of people to attempt to solve problems, the higher the level of information permitting behavior.

### **Information Transmission**

Problem solvers/communicators enhance their ability to solve problems by finding other people with similar problems and by proposing solutions to their problems. The strategy is not only a problem-solving strategy, but it may also be a catalyst for collective action to solve the issue.

Active information forwarding and passive information sharing are both components of information transmission. Information forwarding refers to people actively providing relevant information even when they are not asked to provide them with advice and information on a certain issue. Information sharing refers to the passive sharing of information to others when people are asked to provide suggestions and ideas on a certain issue.

### **Information Acquisition**

The two variables of information acquisition in the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) are derived from the Situational Theory of Publics (STP) (Grunig, 1997). Information seeking is a type of active communication described by Clarke and Kline (1974) as deliberate scanning of the environment for signals related to a defined topic. In contrast, information attending is a passive communication strategy that involves the unplanned discovery of a message followed by prolonged processing of it (Clarke & Kline, 1974). In essence, information seeking is an active behavior that reflects people's deliberate search for information to solve problems, while information attending is a passive behavior characterized by randomly encountered information that is unplanned during the information acquisition process. Information discovery is a type of passive communication behavior.

The variable communicative action in problem solving (CAPS) is multidimensional. There are six subdimensions, which describe the active and passive communication behavior of

information selection, transmission, and acquisition. A brief overview of CAPS' six components is provided in the preceding paragraph. In the next section, we discuss how Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) is utilized to segment publics.

### **Public Segmentation in the Situational Theory of Problem Solving**

In the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS), publics emerges after recognizing problems, integrating socially, and then communicating behavior happened among problem solvers (Kim et al., 2010). The Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) suggests that the general public can be divided into four main groups based on its knowledge and understanding of the problem (Kim et al., 2011).

The nonpublic are those who are not affected by the issue. In the event that people become affected by the issue, but do not recognize it as problematic, they become latent public. According to Kim et al (2011), "a nonpublic is similar to a latent public in that both recognize a problematic situation, albeit for different reasons." In the third group, people recognize that the issue is problematic, but perceive themselves as not affected by it or being constrained. They are the aware public. A public that is active is one that recognizes the problem but perceives few constraints on solving it. Kim et al (2011) argue that as a problem becomes more severe and people feel affected, the more active they become.

### **Antecedent Factors**

In addition to understanding public responses to specific issues, scholars have realized that The Situational Theory of Publics' independent variables may have other important antecedent factors that should also be investigated (Aldoory et al., 2010; Bozkanat & Okay, 2021; Illia et al., 2013). These antecedent variables are included to increase the theory's capacity to explain certain issues. According to Sha (2006:47), "the Situational Theory of Publics has not yet accounted for the influence of culture and culture differences on communication behaviors." While after decades, Bozkanat & Okay (2021) also confirmed culture was a significant antecedent factor in the Situational Theory of Publics.

Aldoory (2010) suggested perceived shared risk as an additional antecedent variable for the dependent variable in risk and crisis situations. Perceived shared experience is defined as the likelihood of a member of the public perceiving a circumstance, issue, or risk that affects a spokesperson or a victim portrayed in news regarding risk (Aldoory et al., 2010). They suggested that this characteristic contributes empirically to more accurate prediction of communication behaviors in risk and crisis circumstances. This study discovered that perceived shared risk may have an impact on communication behavior, problem recognition, and involvement recognition.

Sha (2006) proposed cultural identity as an important antecedent variable in studies of racial and ethnic issues and cross-cultural interaction (Sha, 2006). This study explains that people have different attitudes towards problem recognition, constraint recognition, and investment levels in different cultural backgrounds. Especially in the study of racial, social, or political issues, cultural identity has an important impact on people's problem cognition and communication behavior and is an important antecedent variable. In recent years, with the acceleration of globalization, many countries may face increasing multi-ethnic challenges, just as Sha (2006) stated, intercultural public relations is a contemporary and practical idea since it is based on the importance of cultural identity to communication.

Powell (2016) used qualitative methods investigate the ways in which race and gender affect black women's constraint recognition when considering mediated information about

HIV/AIDS (Powell, 2016). In addition to Sha's (2006) research on cultural identity as an antecedent to the situational theory's IVs, Powell modeled this study after Tindall and Vardeman-Winter's (2011) study of heart disease-related health messages with women of color as the key public (Tindall & Vardeman-Winter, 2011). The results of this study demonstrated an opportunity for an organization to better understand black women as a public.

### **Research on the Situational Theory of Problem Solving**

Situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) is a theoretical model that explores the relationship between people's information cognition reflection and communication behavior for a certain problem situation. It explains the four kind of independent variables, situational motivation for problem solving, and six kind of information dependent variable dissemination behavior, revealing that people in the solution situation, the process of information processing and dissemination from internal information inquiry, external information inquiry, individual completion stage to collective completion stage, and emphasizes that people's communication can be better predicted by understanding the influencing factors that affect people in the problem situation Behavior (Lai, 2014).

The Situational Theory of Problem Solving has been widely used in different fields and regions, making significant contributions to scientific research (Kim & Ni, 2013). Studies on health or cancer information seeking (Chon & Park, 2021; Kim & Hong, 2021; Shen et al., 2019), social vigilantism (Hyun, 2021), health issues such as organ donation (Kim et al., 2011), varies crisis situation such as health crisis and communication crisis (Chon & Park, 2021; Kim & Hong, 2021; Kim, 2015) and food safety issues (Chon et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2021), were amongst the researches that had utilized STOPS.

Kim (2012) used the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) to study the changes in situational awareness and cognitive frameworks across contexts and different sociodemographic variables (Kim et al., 2012). Through research, it is found that the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) is also applicable to different cultural backgrounds and can explain three types of information behaviors, from passive to active. We also found that the motivation of active and passive communication behaviors in public behavior can be effectively explained through four independent variables: problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition and referent criterion.

The findings of research indicate that the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) can be applied to explain all three categories of information behaviors that vary from passive to active in different cultural settings. The Situational Theory of Problem Solving not only can be used under United States culture background, but also suitable in South Korea. Moreover, it was discovered that referent criterion, constraints recognition, and involvement recognition play significant roles in explaining why people engage in active and passive communication activities (Kim et al., 2012).

### **Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) Applied in an Eastern Cultural Context**

Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) expanded from Situational Theory of Public (STP) which originated from Western. In addition to understanding public responses to specific issues, scholars have realized that The Situational Theory of Problem Solving independent variables may have other important antecedent factors that should also be investigated (Aldoory et al., 2010; Bozkanat & Okay, 2021; Illia et al., 2013). These antecedent variables are included to increase the theory's capacity to explain certain issues. According to Sha

(2006:47), “the Situational Theory of Publics has not yet accounted for the influence of culture and culture differences on communication behaviors.” While after decades, Bozkanat and Okay (2021) also confirmed culture was a significant antecedent factor in the Situational Theory of Publics.

In the context of Eastern culture, the application of Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) should consider its cultural differences, which has been confirmed in many eastern communication studies (Akbulut, 2023; Chen et al., 2017; Chin & Zanuddin, 2022; Chon & Park, 2021; Ismail et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2020). Chen (2016) conducted a survey in Chinese context, the study focuses on government policy issue and hot issue. The system of the Chinese government differs from that of Western countries, this study should consider the difference aspect. Chen (2016) reveals the nature and communication behaviors of publics formed around a government policy issue with intensive media coverage in a Chinese society by using STOPS (Chen et al., 2017).

Zhang et al (2020) confirms and extends Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) by examining it in the context of the U.S.-China trade dispute. The study reveals that the attitude towards China’s stand on the trade dispute as a significant negative mediator between antecedent perceptual variables and multiple communicative actions: online information seeking, online information permitting, and information sharing (Zhang et al., 2020). Zhang et al (2020) provides empirical proof of STOPS from a different cultural setting other than the U.S.

Eastern culture is different from Western culture, and different cultural backgrounds make communication more diverse. In the context of Eastern culture, communication research should consider the characteristics of Eastern culture and focus on the targeted application of communication theory in combination with the characteristics of Eastern culture. Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) is a relatively mature theory in communication studies. It is an extension of Western communication theory, Situational Theory of Public (STP).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Situational Theory of Problem Solving (STOPS) emerges as a foundational and versatile framework for understanding publics, particularly when applied within an Eastern cultural context. The theory's emphasis on the dynamic interplay between situational factors and publics' perceptions provides valuable insights into the complexities of communication in diverse cultural landscapes. By acknowledging the nuances of Eastern cultural norms, STOPS not only enriches our understanding of public engagement but also offers a comprehensive tool for practitioners seeking effective problem-solving strategies. As we navigate the ever-evolving global communication landscape, the integration of STOPS into research and practice ensures a more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach to addressing public issues. This theory serves as a bridge, fostering cross-cultural understanding and facilitating more effective communication strategies in the increasingly interconnected world.

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