

EXPERT DISCOURSE ON KEY THEORIES AND APPROACHES TO STUDYING PUBLIC OPINION: A CONCEPT MAP ANALYSIS

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose Public opinion research is undergoing a significant transformation in response to the challenges posed by the digital era, particularly the proliferation of social media and AI-driven tools (Murphy *et al.*, 2014; Kraft *et al.*, 2020). These developments compel scholars to revisit established theories and methodologies for studying opinion formation and expression in dynamic, technology-driven contexts. This study explores the key concepts, models, and perspectives deemed essential by public opinion scholars, using concept map analysis to uncover relationships between these elements and the profiles of experts who employ them. Our study aims to examine: 1) What are the links between key concepts, models, authors, and perspectives that scholars use in their research on public opinion, and 2) How the profile (e.g., expertise, experience, rank, etc.) of the experts maps onto the concepts they use.

Design/methodology/approach We collected our data via a survey conducted primarily among members of the COST OPINION network. The questionnaire used in the study comprised 26 questions, two of which were open-ended. A total of 86 questionnaires completed by public opinion scholars and experts from 33 countries were returned. After initial screening, 82 valid questionnaires were further analyzed.

We used quantitative methods to profile experts and qualitative coding of an open-ended question about the concepts frequently used by the respondents in their public opinion-related work. Additionally, we used concept maps to visualize the findings better and to highlight relationships and patterns in our data.

Findings Preliminary findings show that the concepts and theories stemming from media studies are most frequently used by respondents in their studies on public opinion, e.g., agenda setting, framing, spiral of silence, and uses and gratification theory. These concepts and theoretical perspectives are often extended to include contemporary approaches to public opinion research in the digital environment, e.g., online processing model, digital public sphere, social media engagement theory, and networked publics. Other approaches reflect the impact of AI tools on public opinion, e.g., sentiment analysis and natural language processing, social network analysis, and algorithmic gatekeeping. Concept map analysis revealed hierarchical clusters of public opinion-related concepts, theories, and models at macro (system theories, public sphere concepts, media environment), meso (discursive mechanisms, attitudes, representation, infrastructure), and micro (emotions, interaction, behavior, socio-psychological processes) levels.

Originality/value This study highlights the dynamic interplay between established theories and emerging methodologies in public opinion research, offering insights into how scholars navigate the complexities of opinion formation and expression in the digital age. By mapping expert discourse, our research provides a structured understanding of the evolving landscape of public opinion studies.

Keywords: *Public opinion, Expert discourse, Map analysis, COST Action OPINION network*

JEL classification: *D79*

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