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# Projects that ‘Stand-Out’: Towards a Theory of Project Salience <sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*Why do some projects ‘stand out’ and attract a lot of attention and interest from diverse stakeholders, publics and the media, while others in similar contexts do not? What makes such projects to stand out? To answer this and other related questions, we formulate a definition of project salience and propose a theory of project salience. The formulated definition of project salience is inclusive as it incorporates iconic engineering /architectural projects and non-iconic, but equally salient projects. Based on a review of salience literature, this paper proposes and discusses a theory of project salience, that may be useful for researching and managing high profile projects. Hopefully, this paper makes an important contribution to project management theory development. Further, we hope that the proposed theory of project salience will make an important contribution to project management research.*

**Keywords:** *Project salience, theory of project salience, salient projects, theory development, projects that stand out.*

## **1. Background**

Why do some projects ‘stand out’ and attract a lot of attention and interest from diverse stakeholders, publics and the media, while others in similar contexts do not? What makes such projects to stand out? Do these projects require and present qualitatively and quantitatively different design, planning, implementation and evaluation approaches from other projects in similar contexts? And why is it important for project management scholars and practitioners to focus renewed attention on ‘projects that stand out’? Is there an overarching theory that explains these types of projects? These are important questions requiring theoretically and conceptually grounded response. Managing and

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leading projects that stand out, in a field that is getting more complex and unpredictable, require focus on these questions.

Different scholars have provided different definitions and conceptualizations of projects that *stand out* from other projects in similar settings. These conceptualizations include, among others: *mega projects* (Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, & Rothengatter, 2003; Frey, 2016; Garemo, Matzinger, & Palter, 2015; Gellert & Lynch, 2003); *urban mega projects* ((Orueta & Fainstein, 2008; Fainstein, 2008; Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Gunton, 2003; Glass et al., 2019; Gualini & Majoor, 2007; Schindler & Kanai, 2019; Swyngedouw, 2005); *flagship projects* (Bianchini et al., 1992; Doucet, 2009; Smyth, 1994; Grodach, 2010; Healey et al., 1992); *prestige projects* (Bianchini et al., 1992; Doucet, 2009; Smyth, 1994; Grodach, 2010; Healey et al., 1992); global projects (Orr & Scott 2008 ;Dodson, 1998), among other conceptualizations.

While these conceptualizations have helped project management scholars to conduct useful and innovative studies on such types of projects, we submit that conceptualizing *projects that stand out* around these concepts (. i.e., mega/ flagship/ global/prestige, etc.), narrows and limits theorization of projects that stand out , and reduces such theorization to the 'iconic', architectural, engineering and construction projects, thereby excluding other projects (e.g. cyberterrorism projects, counterterrorism projects, hate crime projects, policy innovations, trade and investment facilitation projects, breakthrough medical research projects, research and development projects, electoral reform projects, among other high profile projects) that are not necessarily 'iconic', architectural, engineering and construction related *but* equally stand out and have the potential to attract a lot of attention and interest from diverse stakeholders, publics and the media.

Limiting projects that 'standout' only to their exogenous features, reduces the scope of such projects and theoretical and conceptual values of these projects. Projects that stand out, irrespective of their nature are high profile. And so, we prefer the use of high-profile projects, since it is inclusive. We also submit that projects that stand out are high profile because of their *saliency*, and it is their *saliency* and their high-profile nature that make them to *stand out*. Thus, mega projects, flagship projects, prestige projects and other projects that stand out in their contexts stand out because of their saliency. We use these concepts to propose a theory of project saliency.

The paper makes one important contribution. The paper contributes to theory building in project management. Kuskela (2000) had charged that the underlying theory of project management is obsolete. While what Kuskela has posited is 'theoretically provocative', we believe that both theory development and theory testing are both important for project management research and practice.

The paper is structured into three sections. Section two reviews extant and recent theoretical literature on the concept of Salience and explicates important elements of salience. In the third section of the paper, we formulate and propose a definition of project salience and a theory of Project Salience, based on the critical elements from the literature and discusses the elements of Project Salience.

## **2. Literature Review on Salience**

We present a review of extant and recent literature on salience drawn mainly from architecture and built environment, cognitive, social and experimental psychology, sociolinguistics, marketing, consumer behavior and from other social sciences, to explicate the critical elements of salience. We admit that different perspectives emphasize different components of salience. Notwithstanding the lack of consensus on the meaning of salience, scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds have explicated critical elements of the concept of salience.

The concept of salience has traditionally been emphasized in the field of social psychology. According to Gardner (1982), the origin of the concept of salience dates back to Kretch and Crutchfield (1948). Recently, the concept has found its current form in the work of Taylor and Fiske in the field of person-perception (Taylor & Fiske 1975; Fiske & Taylor 1991). By emphasizing its inherent nature of prominence, Fiske and Taylor defined salience as the extent to which particular stimuli stand out relative to others in their environment.

Drawing from social psychology, the concept of salience is mostly associated with the ability of a stimuli 'to stand out' from its environment or background (Guido 1998). This ability to stand out and be noticed is perceived as a proprietary of a stimulus. The ability of an object or phenomenon to stand out is related to the concept of 'markedness' (Guido 1998). In linguistics and other social sciences, markedness is the state of 'standing out' as nontypical or divergent in comparison to a regular or more common object or phenomenon. Thus, salient objects or phenomenon are characterized by their ability to stand out, to be noticed and to be markedly different from other objects or phenomenon in the same environment or setting (Guido 1998).

However, markedness depends on the context: what is more marked in some contexts or settings may be less marked in other local contexts. The concept of salience as something that stands out is reinforced by other scholars (Raez 2013; Higgins 1996; McArthur & Post 1977). According to Raez (2013), salient properties 'stand out' from their surroundings and 'attract attention'. Thus, salient objects and phenomenon have the combined capacity to stand out and also to attract attention. As attention grabbers, salient objects and phenomenon stand out. According to McArthur and Post (1977), attention drawing stimuli stands out from their background due to possessing certain inherent characteristics. For Higgins (1996) salience comprises natural prominence and comparative distinctiveness that draws attention selectively to a specific object.

According to Caduff and Timpf (2008) salience denotes relatively distinct, prominent or obvious features compared to other features. They argue that salience is not an inherent property of some specific spatial features, but rather is a unique property of the trilateral relation between the feature itself, the surrounding environment, and the observer's point of view, both, cognitively and physically. The significance and noticeability of prominent feature reinforce its attention grabbing and prominence. The prominence of salient features is reinforced by Caduff and Timpf (2008) in their conceptualization of a landmark: the most general requirement of a landmark is that it must be perceptually salient in some sense (i.e., visually, auditory, olfactory, or semantically).

For Caduff and Timpf (2008) this requires, first of all, that a landmark is markedly contrasted with the its environment (e.g., architectural differentiation), either in terms of its attributes (color, texture, size, shape, etc.) or due to its spatial location with respect to the other objects in the scene. Sorrows and Hirtle (1999) proposed one of the most influential descriptions of the characteristics of landmarks: These aspects are: (1) Visual Prominence, which describes the visual importance of a spatial feature, (2) Semantic Salience, which describes the cultural or historical importance of the feature, and (3) Structural Significance, which explains the role that the feature plays in the configuration of the environment. Salient features are relatively distinct and prominent compared to other features and or processes within the same setting.

According to Weihua Dong, Tong Qin, Hua Liao, Yu Liu & Jiping Liu (2020), landmark visual salience (characterized by features that contrast with their surroundings and visual peculiarities) and semantic salience (characterized by features with unusual or important meaning and content in the environment) are two important factors that affect an individual's visual attention during wayfinding. For Weihua Dong *et al.* (2020), visual salience dominates visual attention. Sorrows and Hirtle (1999) and Weihua Dong *et al.*'s (2020) conceptualizations isolate three critical components and elements of salience: markedness, prominence and attention grabbing. Green (1956) argues that the isolation effect of landmarks results from surprise induced by the change from preceding items: "Surprise increases the attention paid to the item and hence the likelihood of recall" (Green, 1956, p. 340).

For Lynch (1960) and Röser, Hamburger, Krumnack and Knauff (2012) assumptions about landmarks (salience) suggest a high contrast of the landmark to the surrounding environment. These streams of literature highlight the critical elements of salience: salient features are characterized by their capacity for attention focusing, distinctiveness, markedness and prominence. Key salience elements from Weihua Dong *et al.* (2020), Sorrows and Hirtle (1999), Lynch (1960) and Röser, Hamburger, Krumnack and Knauff (2012) include markedness, prominence and attention grabbing. These features also implicate the unpredictable nature of salience: it depends on the context. The contextual nature of salience implies that salience is not a fixed feature that applies in all contexts and settings. What is considered as salient in one context may not necessarily apply in other contexts. For example, a megaproject in a developed country like the USA is

quantitatively and qualitatively different from a megaproject in a developing country like Kenya. Thus, the context specificity of salience reinforces the unpredictable and fluid nature of salient features.

Klippel and Winter (2005) differentiate between three saliences of landmarks: *visual salience* refers to all visual features of an object such as size, shape, colour, texture; *semantic salience* which refers to all knowledge-related features such as famousness of a building or its function; *semantic salience* is often related to how well a building can be named (language component); *structural salience* refers to features (directly) related to navigation. From Klippel and Winter's (2005) conceptualization and reasoning, markedness, prominence and attention grabbing are constitutive elements of salient features like landmarks. Landmarks attract attention because of their prominence, distinctiveness and markedness. According to Presson and Montello (1988), the most common assumption about visual characteristics of landmarks (visual salience) is that they must have a high contrast to their surrounding environment.

The perceptual salience is basically the information that captures the attention of the individual from a given situation or stimulus.; the properties of the images or stimulus become perceptually salient when they play a significant role in processing the information visually. It is an important component of visual attention and it contributes to the visual system to make a particular part of stimuli more significant relative to the other features. This explicates both the distinctiveness, markedness and prominence of salient features. Richter and Winter (2014) posit that objects that are identifiable early on along a route are more useful than those that can only be spotted at the very last moment, suggesting that salient objects in unknown environments must be first and foremost recognizable, a property that relies mostly on the visual features in a given context. Waddill and McDaniel (1998) argues that intuitive explanation of the isolating elements of salience is the perceptual salience of the distinctive event that attracts additional processing. Salience elements from all these stream of literature (Richter and Winter 2014; Klippel and Winter 2005; Presson and Montello 1988) are markedness, prominence, distinctiveness and attention focusing nature of salient features and or objects.

Unpredictableness of salience is highlighted by Rundus (1971) Horstmann (2005) and (Becker & Horstmann (2011)). Isolated items receive more rehearsal than background items in the isolation list (Rundus 1971). Furthermore, Rundus notes that a salient feature or item may appear in the rehearsal protocol, disappear with the presentation of subsequent items, but then reappear at a later point in the list. Horstmann (2005) and (Becker & Horstmann (2011) studies have examined attentional orienting towards a salient item. Salient items that were not novel but rather familiar completely failed to capture attention or attracted attention only. This contradictory nature of salient features implicates the unpredictable nature of salience.

Saliency is also related to surprise. Yantis and Egeth (1999) posit that that a surprising salient item captures attention in a similar manner to a surprising feature. The perspective that saliency relates to saliency and salient events is reinforced by Found & Müller (1996), who also maintain that saliency signals are pre-attentively available. This view suggests that saliency is unpredictable. According to James (1890), a concept he called attentional capture, or the exogenous allocation of attention, is captured by salient properties of the environment, independent of the observer's intentions (James 1890).

The unpredictable nature of saliency is reinforced by Pryor and Kriss (1977) who suggested that something is salient when it receives a disproportional amount of attention from the observer in relation to its context. The fact that saliency is context specific implies the unpredictable nature of saliency: what is salient in one context is not necessarily salient in a similar context. The unpredictable nature of saliency is reinforced by Green (1956), who argues that salient features result from surprise induced by the change from preceding items: surprise increases the attention paid to the item and hence the likelihood of recall. Surprise, which is inherently contradictory, enhances saliency. The unpredictable nature of saliency is demonstrated by Markman and Gentner (1993) who have shown that aligned differences come to mind more readily and more frequently than unaligned differences.

The attention-grabbing nature of saliency recur in Smith and Mackie (2000) who described saliency as a cue's ability that attracts attention in its particular context. Couclelis, Golledge and Tobler (1987) posit that landmarks are helpful in wayfinding because they "stand out" of the environment, can serve as anchors, are better remembered if a change of direction is required. Presson and Montello (1988); Janzen and van Turenhout (2004), Caduff and Timpf, (2008), isolate the distinctiveness of landmarks: the potential landmark must have a high contrast to its immediate or wider surrounding. Treisman and Gelade (1980) posit that a salient object needs to stand out compared to other objects. For Schmidt (1991); Jenkins and Postman (1948), distinctiveness is a descriptive term for events that violate the prevailing context that is, for events that are perceptually salient. Distinctiveness encompasses not only the effects of perceptual saliency and conceptual incongruity but, more generally, any effect of difference. This implicates the unpredictable nature of saliency.

Schmidt (1991) correctly observes that distinctiveness has been used to explain a vast array of phenomena, but then goes on to advocate limiting its use to situations with common operational definitions. On Schmidt's definition of distinctiveness: distinctive events are those incongruent with active conceptual frameworks. According to Itti and Koch (2000) the greater contrast between landmarks with what is around them increases their saliency. Sorrows and Hirtle (1999) posit that landmark saliency depends on some features that are distinctive from their surroundings rather than the individual attributes of the landmark. Most of the current landmark research is based on Sorrows and Hirtle's classification criteria which divides landmark saliency into three aspects: visual, cognitive and structural. This perspective reinforces not just the distinctiveness and prominence of

landmark but also reinforce its unpredictable. Raubal and Winter (2002) proposed a formal model of landmark salience based on Sorrows and Hirtle's framework, focusing on the attractiveness of landmarks.

Kattenbeck (2017; 2016) argue that given a local environment an observer is in, salience is the degree to which an object, persistent enough to be used in route instructions, draws the average pedestrian observer's attention. According to Kattenbeck (2017; 2016) this degree is evoked by: 1. visual features the objects have (visual salience), 2. the degree of prototypicality it shows (prototypicality), 3. how identifiable it is when approached (visibility in advance), 4. the ease with which it may be integrated into a route description (structural salience) and 5. the degree as to which it can evoke prior knowledge about the object (cognitive salience). For Caduff and Timpf (2008), landmark salience is derived as a result of the observer's point of view, both physical and cognitive, the surrounding environment, and the objects contained therein. Sorrows and Hirtle (1999) proposed a concept which concentrates more on the physical aspects of the landmarks: visual (visual characteristics of the landmark), cognitive (meaning or prototypicality), and structural (location in space) salience.

Lynch (1960) assumes objects to have inherent physical features that make them salient landmark. Denis *et al.* (1999) argued that salient features like landmarks are distinctive objects in the city environment. Presson and Montello (1988) emphasized the importance of visual contrast of an object to its immediate surrounding. Thus, visual aspects seem to play a major role in landmark. While Caduff and Timpf (2008) proposed the importance of relatively distinct, prominent or obvious features compared to other features. Hamburger and Röser (2011) perceptual salience as the physical aspects of the object that make them distinct and prominent. Itti and Koch (2001) posit that one inherent salience aspect is the contrast to the surroundings. There are several definitions of the term 'landmark', all of which acknowledge an element's prominence in a particular situation and its potential to serve in a cognitive representation of a route (Lynch 1960; Presson; 1988; Sorrows and Hirtle 1999). Objects and phenomenon need to be highly noticeable in order to pop out from the surroundings (Presson & Montello, 1988; Janzen & van Turenout, 2004).

Guido (1995a; 1995b) conceptualizes the concept of salience by the principle of figure-ground, a principle of gestalt theory, which hypothesizes that people direct their attention to those aspects of the perceptual field that stand out in a background. Elements of salience grounded on the figure-ground principle relate to figurality (brightness, complexity) and contextual novelty (stimuli that appears in isolation).

Writing from a sociolinguistic perspective, Zarcone, van Schijndel, Vogels and Demberg (2016) argue that salience has been used for a diverse range of phenomenon to indicate a property that is cognitively prominent and noticeable. They further posit that salience has also been associated with surprise. Cognition is about the knowledge and experience of things, events, including a series of mental activities such as feeling, memory, thought,

judgement, inference and imagination. According to Long (2020), the concept of cognitive prominence includes constructs such as prominence and foregrounding. Thus, cognitive prominence ensures that salient phenomenon is usually foregrounded and that it becomes the focus of attention (Zarcone, van Schijndel, Vogels and Demberg 2016; Long 2020).

According to Anderson and Matheny (2004) salient phenomenon or objects can be attention grabbing because such stimuli are relatively distinct, peculiar, and rare in the social context as advanced by distinctiveness theory. Thus, salience depends not only on the stimuli's features that capture attention, but also on the perception of the individual of the stimuli's distinctiveness relative to other stimuli in the context. Attention drawing stimuli may stand out due to their size, colour, novelty (Taylor & Fiske 1975).

Boswijk and Coler (2020) consider salience in terms of three parameters: predictability; top-down salience, and bottom-up salience. Predictability implies infrequent features that are unexpected and or surprising, which makes them stand out and thereby more salient. Top-down salience implies external sources that provide a context in which something becomes salient. Bottom-up salience implies that there is an intrinsic property of the feature that makes a feature more noticeable.

From review of literature on salience, the following four elements recur: (1) *Attention-Grabbing*, (2) *Prominence*, (3) *Markedness*, and (4) *Unpredictability*. The identified elements of salience are important for our conceptualization of the proposed theory of 'project salience'. Some of these salience variables may relate to the other salience variables and may also share indicators. While this may be criticized by some scholars, we argue that 'relatedness' of these elements may explain the 'fluidity', unpredictability and uncertainty of salience. We have not discussed these elements in any particularly preferred order and have avoided as much as possible conducting another literature review in this section.

### **3. Towards a Theory of Project Salience**

In this last section, we present a conceptualization of '*Project Salience*' and propose a *Theory of Project Salience*, based on the elements of salience that consistently recur in the reviewed salience literature. Importantly, we submit that the recurring elements are not exclusive: other elements might have been inadvertently left out during the review of the literature on salience. Notwithstanding the non-exhaustive review, have identified recurring elements to propose a definition of project salience and a theory of project salience.

#### **3.1. Proposed Definition of Project Salience**

So, what is *Project Salience*? Based on the review of extant and recent work on salience in section two of this paper, we propose the following definition of Project Salience:



*Project Salience is the degree to which a project stands out in comparison to other projects in similar contexts. A project that stands out is characterized by its markedness, prominence, unpredictability and attention-grabbing capability. A project with high salience stands out whereas a project with low salience does not.*

While we submit that the above definition of Project Salience may have its own limitations, we believe that it includes both iconic (large scale engineering and or architectural and non-iconic projects). After the proposed definition, we now discuss each of the recurring elements of salience to build a theory of project salience.

### **3.2. Proposed Theory of Project Salience**

Why do some projects '*stand out*' and attract a lot of attention and interest from diverse stakeholders, publics and the media, while others in similar contexts do not? What makes such projects to *stand out*? Do these projects require and present qualitatively and quantitatively different design, planning, implementation and evaluation approaches from other projects in similar contexts? And why is it important for project management scholars and researchers to focus renewed attention on '*projects that stand out*'? Is there an overarching theory that explains these types of projects? These are important questions requiring theoretically and conceptually grounded response. We attempt to answer some of these questions, and in the process, propose a theory of project salience.

From the review of literature on salience, the following four elements recur: (1) *Attention-Grabbing*, (2) *Prominence*, (3) *Markedness*, and (4) *Unpredictableness*. We submit that some of the recurring salience variables may be related to the other salience variables and may also share indicators. While this may be a limitation, we argue that 'relatedness' of these salience elements may explain the 'fluidity', unpredictability and uncertainty of the concept of salience. We have not discussed these elements in any particularly preferred order and have avoided source citation in this section.

#### **3.2.1. Salience as Project Prominence**

One of the recurring element or components of salience is *prominence*. In semiotics, prominence refers to the relative importance of a sign: anything that communicates a meaning. Prominence of a phenomenon (object or product) may help people to rank large amounts of information by the importance they attach to the phenomenon thereby give attention to that which they perceive as most important. We therefore define prominence as the importance that people, especially decision makers give to a project.

Questions that may guide the conceptualization of project *salience as project prominence* may include, but not limited to the following: how important/ prominent is the project, to decision makers and other critical stakeholders? Why is high importance or prominence attached to the project? Essentially, prominence has to do with the importance of a project, program, intervention or policy to decision makers and other critical stakeholders. Prominence is an important salience variable, as it helps us to explore and understand

the importance that decision makers and other critical stakeholders attach to *important* projects that they prioritize.

While social science scholars including social psychologists have focused much attention on the *exogenous* attributes and features of salient phenomenon, we submit that the *endogenous* attributes are equally important for a full understanding of project saliency. Exogenous attributes relate to the external features of a phenomenon that makes it salient, while endogenous features relate to the internal attributes of the phenomenon. In the context of this paper, exogenous attributes of important and prominent projects may relate to their multi-geographical scope (e.g., The Belt and Road Initiative, transnational railways, etc.), their iconic nature, design aesthetics, and the *symbolic power* of such projects. Endogenous attributes of salient projects may relate to a project's *strategic value*: the degree and extent to which the prioritized project is expected to promote the interests, goals and objectives of the project sponsors (parent organizations, governments, financiers, stakeholders and the project's overall alignment with strategic intents of the project sponsors and other decision makers.

Based on these two features of prominence (exogenous and endogenous) we submit that critical project stakeholders and decision makers may attach differing importance to project prominence. For instance, governments, political parties and politicians may focus attention on endogenous attributes of salient projects to reinforce their competence and output legitimacy (performance) and to dazzle the imagination of the publics/ citizens. At the same time governments, political parties and politicians may focus attention on the endogenous attributes of the salient project to address a number of policy challenges including urban sprawls, unemployment., security among other 'wicked problems'.

Governments, the private sector and politicians may focus on important and prominent projects (urban and other mega projects, prestige projects, flagship) to mobilize and cement public support (popular support) and also to address economic development challenges including other wicked problems. Exogenous and endogenous attributes, may therefore explain the importance and the prominence that decision makers attach to projects they perceive as prominent. This logic explains why iconic, mega, prestige and large-scale development projects are prioritized by governments, ruling parties and politicians, especially in developing countries, because of their prominence in the policy and political spaces and discourse.

### **3.2.2. Saliency as Project Markedness**

Markedness is a concept that dominates saliency discourse and scholarship. Despite the complexity inherent in this concept, we argue that the concept of markedness is relevant to theory building in project management. In sociolinguistics and other 'language sciences', markedness is defined as the *state of standing out as nontypical or divergent in comparison to regular and more common form*. This definition is important for our understanding of markedness and its application to projects, and it is equally usefully in

theory building in project management, especially in the contexts of large-scale projects like megaprojects, flagship projects and prestige projects. Markedness is the ability of a phenomenon to 'stand-out'.

The Meridian Dictionary equally defines markedness as something that 'stands-out'. is conspicuous. Any project, product or service that stands out is qualitatively and quantitatively different from the others in similar settings or contexts. In this perspective, markedness implies dominance. Markedness as a feature of project saliency has theoretical and conceptual relevance for projects that stand out. Though iconic projects like megaprojects, prestige projects and flagship projects 'stand out' and dominate the environments where they are constructed, markedness should not only be limited to iconic projects, as there are other types of projects that are not necessarily iconic, but have the capacity for markedness and do stand out from the rest of the other typical and normal regular projects. Such projects may be spatially, emotionally and or ideologically dominant. Their markedness and dominance may be seen in the way they colonize public spaces and discourse in their settings.

Markedness relates well with dominance, whose verb is 'dominate' and whose adjective is 'dominant', 'having power and influence over others'. We submit that these phrases and indicators of dominance relate well with the nature and attributes of not just iconic and large-scale projects like megaprojects, prestige projects and flagship projects, but resonate equally with other non-architectural and non-engineering projects that equally dominate public discourse. Apart from being the dominant logic of project development and management especially in urban and city spaces across the world, large scale projects also dominate and colonize these spaces.

In genetics, dominance is the phenomenon of one variant of a gene or chromosome masking or overriding the effect of a different variant of the same gene on the other copy of the chromosome. In social sciences, dominance implies the state of being in control or having more power than other. Dominance means control, domination, influence, power, preeminence, ascendancy and rule sovereignty. Because of their markedness and dominance, salient projects 'mask' and 'override' other typical projects in the contexts and settings where they are implemented. These projects 'exude power and influence' in their environments; and they also transmit the power and influence to their sponsors. While some people may question the relevance of markedness and its importance and relevance to project management, we submit that project markedness influences the way such projects are managed and the importance that stakeholders attach to such projects.

Saliency as project markedness also implies non-typicality and divergence. Nontypical and divergent projects are markedly different from typical and convergent projects. Nontypical projects are not our common and usual projects: such projects are unusual and unconventional. Divergence implicates deviation from standards and norms. Such projects are 'transgressive', and are 'rule breaking'. Nontypicality and the divergent nature of markedness are equally applicable and relevant to theory building in project

management, and relate to the nature and salient projects. These projects are nontypical, divergent, 'transgressive'- norm and rule breaking and are markedly different from typical and conventional projects that are routinely designed and implemented.

Project markedness as non-regularity and divergence also imply complexity and uncertainty. We submit that markedness is a critical pillar of project saliency and theory building in project management. Through their dominance exacerbated by their markedness, salient projects introduce complexity and uncertainty as they radically reconfigure their contexts and environments where they are constructed and or implemented. Because of their complex nature, project markedness not only introduce uncertainty but also confer power and influence on their sponsors and financiers and other critical stakeholders. Stakeholders are equally attracted to these markedly salient projects, because of the power and influence that such projects confer on them. Saliency as project markedness is theoretically and conceptually rich variable and has potential implications on the theory and practice of project management.

### **3.2.3. Saliency as Project Unpredictability**

From the extant and recent literature, *unpredictability* is an important element of Saliency. Unpredictability refers to a state or quality of being unpredictable. Some of the important synonyms of unpredictability include uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, among others. We submit that these variants of unpredictability help in explaining and understanding project saliency. Saliency as project unpredictability implies unpredictability and uncertainty, two attributes that can exacerbate the saliency of projects, and they make stakeholders to focus increased attention on such salient projects. The more unpredictable and uncertain these projects get, the more attention and focus they receive from stakeholders, media and the public. The media focuses attention on high profile unpredictable and uncertain projects.

Thus, project unpredictability, contributes theory development around project saliency: the unpredictable and uncertain nature of salient projects, make such projects to 'stand out', thereby putting them on the radar of stakeholders and the media. For instance, whereas governments and politicians in developed and developing countries may be infatuated with high profile and large-scale projects, the unpredictability (uncertainty and unpredictability) of these projects can affect their performance.

However, unpredictability of such salient projects may be exploited by incumbent governments and political leaders, who may use these issues to galvanize support for extension of their terms in office or may use them as canvass for re-election to enable them complete these projects. Moreover, political opponents may also use the unpredictability of such projects to cast aspersions on the competence and legitimacy of governments of the incumbents who approve and finance such projects. In such contexts, saliency as project unpredictability may be used for different purposes by different project stakeholders, thereby enhancing the value of this concept.

We submit that saliency as project unpredictability also implies ambiguity. Ambiguity is the quality or state of being open to multiple interpretations. Salient projects operate in complex and turbulent environments, which are the domain of ambiguity. The unpredictability of these projects implies that they can be subjected to multiple interpretations. Their performance may also be mixed, thereby reinforcing their ambiguity. Moreover, salient projects have multiple and diverse stakeholders, with different and conflicting interests. The differing expectations from stakeholders and the possibility of mixed and ambiguous performance of salient projects may create room for what we call strategic project ambiguity, a term that we define as the practice by project stakeholders, especially project managers, to be intentionally ambiguous and inexact on certain aspects of a project or projects. Ambiguity and ambiguous project situations and contexts, introduced by unpredictability may make project stakeholders to focus increased attention on such projects, thereby exacerbating the saliency of such projects. Invariably, saliency as project unpredictability increases the saliency of these type of projects.

We therefore submit that saliency as project unpredictability introduces and provides theoretically and conceptually rich and exciting opportunity for theory building around project saliency. We further submit that ambiguity as an aspect of project unpredictability presents projects owners and managers with opportunities to rationalize the implementation performance of salient and unpredictable projects since the challenges and issues around implementation and performance of such unpredictable and ambiguous projects may be subjected to multiple interpretations, thus rationalizing implementation performance of such projects.

Incumbent governments and politicians in developing and emerging economies, faced with ambiguous performance of salient projects, may use unpredictability and ambiguity of such salient projects to galvanize more support and time, to enable them address the ambiguous issues around the projects. In such situations, ambiguous projects may serve strategic and political goal. Moreover, incumbent governments and politicians may use project ambiguity as a strategy for mobilizing voters and may devise their election pledges and promises around salient but ambiguous project goals and outcomes. Ironically, project ambiguity may also be used by critics of incumbent governments and political leaders to politically malign the incumbents as non-performers, thereby questioning and undermining the legitimacy (input and output) and competence of the incumbents. Thus, ambiguity arising from project unpredictability may greatly contribute to theory development around project saliency.

Saliency as project unpredictability also invites contradictions. Contradictory phenomena and systems stand out. Contradictions involving salient projects may exacerbate the saliency of such projects. High profile and salient projects may have poor performance and contradictory outcomes, despite the massive financial expenditures involved in such projects. Unpredictability may exacerbate contradictions thereby heightening the capacity of such projects to stand out, even as they are subjected to virulent criticisms and consistent scrutiny by stakeholders and the media. For instance,

the media may 'profile' salient projects that have mixed and contradictory performance and outcomes.

In the political field, opponents and critics of incumbent governments and political leaders may highlight such contradictions arising from the mixed and poor performance of high-profile salient projects to question the legitimacy, performance and competence of incumbents responsible for such contradictory projects. From a social science perspective, such projects get 'marked, and this marking may arise from their unpredictableness, ambiguity and contradictions. The contradictory and mixed performance of such projects make them to stand out thereby enhancing their salience.

#### **3.2.4. Salience as Attention-Grabbing Projects**

*Attention-grabbing* has a prominent place in salience literature. Attention grabbing phenomena make people to momentarily stop what they are doing and think about what they have seen, heard or read about the phenomenon. Attention grabbers are captivating, capable of attracting and holding people's interest. Salient projects have the capacity to grab and hook the attention of the publics and stakeholders, thus conferring such project with high salience. Attention grabbing projects may create surprise, or what some salience scholars call 'surprisal': the capacity to surprise. Surprise can have any valence: pleasant/ unpleasant, positive/ negative. Scholars argue that surprise represent the difference between expectations and reality, the gap between assumptions and expectations about worldly events and the way these events actually turn out. Surprise can also occur due to the violation of expectations/ expectancies. Thus, high profile projects can cause surprise due to a number of factors including their novelty and when they violate the expectations of the publics and stakeholders.

While exogenous and novel features of salient projects may engender surprisal and may cause surprise among the stakeholders and the public if these salient projects violate the performance expectations of stakeholders and the publics. Violation of performance expectations of salient and high-profile projects may cause surprise thereby exacerbating the attention and the focus of stakeholders and the publics on such salient projects. Expectation's violation is a double-edged sword: it can be both positive and negative. Positive expectation violation occurs when attention-grabbing project contradicts the conventional thinking and produce positive results as expected by stakeholders. Negative expectancy violation occurs when salient projects produce unacceptably poor outcomes or results.

The publics and project stakeholders may be surprised with the positive outcomes of a poorly planned and implemented salient project. Surprise may be equally engendered when poorly managed attention-grabbing projects are delivered in time, within budget and above the expectations. The capacity of attention-grabbing projects to generate positive and negative results make them stand out and put such projects on the radar of the

publics. Attention-grabbing high-profile projects that engender surprisal have higher salience compared to other non-salient projects in the same setting or context.

Attention grabbing projects are conspicuous. Conspicuousness is the quality of being noticeable or easy to see and readily visible. The conspicuousness of high-profile projects relates to their inherent capacity to attract attention from diverse publics and stakeholders including the media. Conspicuous projects are striking, noticeable and visible, making such projects to be attention-grabbers. Conspicuousness of high-profile projects make such projects to stand out and make them more attractive to governments, politicians, corporate investors and business leaders, the publics and the media. Governments and politicians may therefore favour and prioritize attention grabbing and highly conspicuous projects, to bolster their public image and to enhance their output legitimacy (performance). However, conspicuousness is context specific: what appears conspicuous is one context (country, organization) may be less conspicuous in another local context.

The attention-grabbing capability of a project may legitimize and delegitimize project sponsors and stakeholders, at the same time, depending on the context. For example, while governments and political leaders may use attention grabbing projects to mobilize support and hopefully expect to improve their legitimacy, attention grabbing but non performing projects may undermine the perceived competence, performance and legitimacy of sponsoring governments and politicians, and may invariably delegitimize rather than legitimize the sponsors of such projects. When attention grabbing projects fail to deliver the much publicized and anticipated results, stakeholders and the public including those against the projects, may criticize such conspicuous and attention-grabbing projects as wasteful, 'showy', and as cash cows. In the corporate world for example, conspicuous and attention-grabbing projects may equally legitimize and delegitimize legitimacy of sponsoring CEOs and corporate project managers, depending on the performance of such attention-grabbing corporate projects. Thus, the attention-grabbing and conspicuous projects contributes to theoretical development of a theory of project salience.

Salient projects have higher attention-grabbing capability compared to non-salient projects. While some attention-grabbing projects may be physically and aesthetically attractive, limiting the attention-grabbing potential of salient projects to their exogenous features may limit the salience and power of attention-grabbing projects. Whereas iconic architectural and engineering projects are attention grabbers, there are a number of non-iconic architectural and engineering projects that have the potential to grab attention. Such non iconic attention-grabbing projects may include high profile business and policy projects, hate crime projects, electoral reform projects. These projects are attention grabbers because of their strategic attractiveness. Strategic attractiveness of attention-grabbing projects is the degree and extent to which salient projects addresses the top strategic business priorities of an organization.

For example, a trade and investment facilitation projects may attract attention because of its strategic attractiveness. Large scale development projects implemented by governments and the private sector in developing countries may be aesthetically and strategically attractive because of their attention-grabbing capability. However, attention grabbing capability of high-profile projects also increase their complexity and ambiguities. Attention grabbing is therefore a critical and important variable of project saliency and has strong relevance to theory development around project saliency.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to answer important questions: *Why do some projects 'stand out' and attract a lot of attention and interest from diverse stakeholders, publics and the media, while others in similar contexts do not? What makes such projects to stand out?* To answer this and other related questions, we formulated a definition of project saliency and propose a theory of project saliency. The formulated definition of project saliency is inclusive as it incorporates iconic engineering and architectural projects and non-iconic, but equally salient and high-profile projects. Based on a fairly comprehensive review of saliency literature, this paper proposes a theory of project saliency, that may be useful for researching and managing salient projects. This paper makes an important contribution to project management theory building and development. Further, we hope that the proposed theory of project saliency will make important contribution to project management research and the management of projects.

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