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Letter from the Editor

As we present the latest issue of the Journal of Public Relations Educator, a common theme emerges across the contributions: the critical role of evolving pedagogical practices in equipping public relations students to meet contemporary challenges. This issue underscores the field's pressing need to adapt and innovate in response to societal, technological, and ethical transformations often, and lately, in a highly charged political environment.

Several articles emphasize the importance of experiential learning as a cornerstone of public relations education. The study on the PRSSA Bateman Case Study Competition explores how such initiatives can provide students with practical, hands-on experiences that align with industry expectations while integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) considerations. Similarly, the teaching brief on group work in research methods courses addresses the persistent challenges of collaboration in post-pandemic classrooms, offering motivational strategies to foster engagement and equitable participation.

The themes of ethics and critical thinking are equally prominent. One article delves into the skillsets required for managing (mis/dis) information, stressing the ethical responsibilities of PR professionals in navigating the post-truth era. This contribution highlights the importance of incorporating ethics into curricula and suggests practical strategies for combating disinformation through transparency and proactive communication. Another piece introduces moral entrepreneurship as a pedagogical framework, encouraging educators to integrate activism and ethical leadership into the curriculum to prepare students for roles as change agents in a rapidly evolving field.

Finally, this issue addresses student autonomy and privacy, exploring how educators can respect privacy boundaries while leveraging digital tools for learning. This teaching brief reflects on the balance between fostering critical digital literacy and maintaining ethical standards in the classroom, showcasing innovative assignments that empower students to navigate the digital landscape responsibly.

Through these diverse yet interconnected discussions, this issue reaffirms the transformative potential of public relations education when it embraces innovation, ethical rigor, and inclusivity. As educators, researchers, and practitioners, we have a shared responsibility to continue evolving our practices to better serve our students and society. Our educators in this issue once again have effectively transformed wicked problems into practical and professional solutions. I'm so proud of our work at JPRE, and I hope these scholars inspire your practice.

Thank you for a great first year working with an incredible volunteer team to elevate PR pedagogy research to its deserved prominence. Our appreciation goes out to the Editorial Review Board, the Past Editors Council, as well as our beloved sponsors, the Arthur W. Page Center for Integrity in Public Communication and the Stan Richards School of Advertising & Public Relations - Moody College at the University of Texas at Austin.

I hope a restful break is upon you and the new year brings you joy.

Adrienne A. Wallace
Editor-in-Chief

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Identifying (Mis/Dis)Information Skills: The Need for Educating and Training a Holistic PR Professional

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, public relations professionals play a vital role in managing information, particularly (mis/dis)information. Understanding the ethical implications and resources needed to navigate (mis/dis)information is crucial. This study explores PR professionals' perceptions of ethical education and the skills and resources required to address (mis/dis)information. In-depth interviews with professionals reveal insights for better preparing the next generation of PR professionals to navigate the post-truth era effectively. These findings shed light on the multifaceted skill set needed by PR professionals and the essential role of both informal and formal resources in preparing them to navigate (mis/dis)information effectively. Recommendations for education emphasize experiential learning, ethics-focused content, and readily available online resources.

Keywords: public relations ethics, disinformation, misinformation, public relations education

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In an era characterized by the rapid dissemination of information through digital channels, the role of public relations (PR) professionals has evolved into a critical force in shaping public discussion and discourse (Heath, 2000). The digital landscape offers unparalleled engagement and information exchange opportunities, yet it also presents a daunting challenge – the pervasive presence of (mis/dis)information. As PR professionals find themselves at the forefront of managing and mediating information flows, it has become paramount to understand and effectively address ethical dilemmas, particularly those surrounding (mis/dis) information.

Misinformation, defined as inaccurate information that may not necessarily be intentionally falsified but diverges from expert judgments or empirical evidence (Vraga & Bode, 2020), coexists with disinformation, which comprises deliberately inaccurate information designed for persuasion and intentional dissemination (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The line between misinformation and disinformation blurs at the point where intent intersects with information manipulation. Understanding this distinction is pivotal to the PR professional's effective management of the information landscape. In addition, understanding (mis/dis)information from an ethical standpoint is vital in public relations because it enables practitioners to discern between unintentional errors and deliberate attempts to deceive the public (Edwards, 2020). This distinction informs responsible decision-making and helps PR professionals uphold ethical standards, maintaining the credibility and trust essential for effective communication and stakeholder relationship-building.

Ethical considerations are key to the practice of public relations, where practitioners often act as intermediaries between organizations and the public, making decisions that can profoundly impact society (Heath, 2000). Public relations professionals wield considerable influence in shaping narratives and disseminating information, making ethical considerations essential to maintain the integrity and credibility of the profession. Educators have employed various pedagogical approaches to instill ethical values and principles in future PR professionals. These include incorporating ethical theories and case studies into curricula, encouraging critical thinking about ethical dilemmas, emphasizing industry-specific codes of ethics, and providing opportunities for practical application and discussion (Del Rosso et al., 2020). Additionally, it is important to adapt teaching methods to address evolving challenges, such as the management of (mis/dis)information in the digital age (Krishna et al., 2020). Continuously exploring and refining ethical instruction can equip students and professionals with the knowledge and skills needed to act effectively in challenging situations..

This manuscript delves into the perspectives and experiences of PR professionals to explore how they perceive the coverage of ethical issues, particularly in dealing with (mis/dis)information. Furthermore, it seeks to identify the essential skills necessary for navigating this complex terrain and the resources that facilitate ongoing professional development in an age where (mis/dis)information proliferates. Krishna et al. (2020) highlighted the need for future public relations professionals "to communicate effectively in today's environment of disinformation" (p. 51). Although this need has been emphasized, research has not examined what core skills are necessary. As such, the current research endeavor aims to better understand how public relations educators, both in the classroom and in continuing education, can help professionals succeed in this climate of false truths. To do so, in-depth interviews were conducted with public relations professionals to uncover the nuances of PR education and training in the context of (mis/dis)information. This paper offers insights that work to empower professionals and educators to confront the difficulties of the post-truth era more adeptly.

Literature Review

Defining Deception-based Tactics Within Public Relations

Delving into the ethical landscape of public relations unveils a historical backdrop characterized by a spectrum of (mis/dis)information tactics, including propaganda, fake news, and astroturfing (e.g., Curtin & Gaither, 2005; L'Etang, 1998; Tandoc et al., 2018). Before the formalization of public relations as a profession, terms like "public relations" and "propaganda" were often used interchangeably. Before the formalization of public relations as a profession, terms like "public relations" and "propaganda" were often used interchangeably. The founding of the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) in the United Kingdom in 1948 was a pivotal moment in the evolution of public relations, signaling a shift towards ethical practices and professional standards (L'Etang, 1998). While the profession has evolved, ethical lapses persist, necessitating an exploration of the deceptive strategies employed and their implications (Fawkes, 2012).

The term "fake news" gained prominence during the 2016 U.S. presidential election but had been part of media discussions for some time (Tandoc et al., 2018). Scholars define fake news as "intentionally and verifiably false news articles that have the potential to mislead readers" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). What sets fake news apart in public relations is often its association with financial gain, as PR professionals may resort to deceptive practices to insert persuasive messaging into news media. Another disinformation tactic is astroturfing, which often emerges from unethical PR campaigns where the origin and intent of the message are deliberately concealed to hide the identities of the backers (e.g., Boman & Schneider, 2021; Zerback et al., 2021). What distinguishes astroturfing from ethical PR tactics like grassroots campaigns is its underlying motive: it creates a false impression of public support or opposition, serving a specific agenda (Farkas, 2018).

Astroturfing encompasses actions such as company-employed bloggers posting seemingly unbiased product reviews, pay-for-play arrangements, and advertisements redirecting to corporate-generated content.

Strategies Used to Combat False Truths

Communication experts employ a multifaceted approach to combat (mis/dis)information, utilizing proactive strategies like inoculation and supportive messaging, reactive responses, and media literacy (Compton et al., 2021; Jang & Kim, 2018; van der Linden, 2022; Zerback et al., 2021). For example, inoculation preempts false information by providing accurate facts, enhancing critical thinking across diverse fields including public health (see Basol et al., 2021; Richards & Banas, 2018; van der Linden et al., 2020), politics (see An & Pfau, 2004; Ivanov et al., 2018), and science (see Compton et al., 2021; Roozenbeek et al., 2022). Additionally, using supportive messaging by building trust through transparent and credible information, is crucial across various industries where trust in institutions and media is eroding (McGuire, 1961; Wan & Pfau, 2004). Through consistent delivery of these messages, communication professionals can contribute to a more informed and discerning public, making it challenging for (mis/dis)information to gain traction (Boman & Schneider, 2021).

Reactive, swift responses, often in the form of debunking, are essential when (mis/dis)information surfaces, correcting inaccuracies and reinforcing trust in reliable sources (Y. Kim & Lim, 2023). Moreover, media literacy programs, integral to PR efforts, educate the public on evaluating information sources and recognizing propaganda techniques, empowering individuals across industries to navigate the information landscape effectively (Fullerton et al., 2020). The integration of proactive and reactive messaging with media literacy initiatives empowers professionals in various industries to combat (mis/dis)information, fostering an informed and discerning society.

Guiding these strategies within the industry are personal and professional ethics, acting as a compass for public relations professionals in their mission to address (mis/dis)information.

Using Ethics to Navigate False Truths

Ethics plays a fundamental role in shaping the conduct of public relations professionals, and should serve as a guiding compass in their interactions and decision-making processes (Place, 2015). This significance is particularly heightened in the context of (mis/dis) information, where the potential consequences for public perception and trust are substantial. In a landscape where false information can quickly spread through various channels, adhering to ethical principles becomes a crucial safeguard against the erosion of trust (Fawkes, 2012). Professionals who prioritize ethical decision-making not only contribute to the overall credibility of the field but also actively work towards fostering a transparent and trustworthy communication environment amid the challenges posed by false information (Fawkes, 2012).

Ethical decision-making is defined as rational choices between good and bad, justifiable or unjustifiable actions (Patterson & Wilkins, 2005). To help guide this process, public relations scholars have integrated moral philosophy frameworks, such as business ethics (Rossi et al., 2021), ethics of leadership (Lee & Cheng, 2012), virtue ethics (Seeger & Ulmer, 2001), ethics of justice (Simola, 2003), and ethics of care (Lemon & Boman, 2022). Each framework provides a lens to determine appropriate behaviors and actions. For example, business ethics focuses on the impact of intentional organizational behaviors on publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). While ethical dimensions provide valuable guidance, practical applications often rely on established codes within the field of public relations. These codes not only encapsulate the broader ethical principles but also serve as practical tools for professionals to navigate the intricate landscape of ethical decision-making.

Code of Ethics

Codes of ethics are a routine way for professional organizations to communicate key principles for practitioners to use in decision-making. Within the field of public relations, not only do codes of ethics aid in establishing standards to aid in decision making, they can also serve as reference to balance the sometimes conflicting needs and duties of serving the public and clients (Schauster & Neill, 2017). These ethical guidelines underscore the importance of truth, accuracy, and transparency in all public relations endeavors (PRSA, n.d.).

In a review of 45 codes of ethics representing professional public relations associations in 107 countries, Kim and Ki (2014) observed that within public relations, codes of ethics signify professionalism and efforts to comply with ethical standards. As Bowen (2007) argued, these codes "reflect the current state of ethics in the field" (p. 239). For this reason, we turn our attention to codes of ethics presented by major public relations education associations and industry groups to understand their relevance and applicability to the emergence of(mis/dis)information.

Higher Education Resources

In the higher education context, resources from the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) and the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) offer general ethical guidance to educators. These organizations provide insight into expectations for educators who are teaching students how to approach and respond to misinformation and disinformation. The AEJMC Code of Ethics (2005), which the organization adapted from a code produced by the National Education Association (NEA), is primarily concerned with educators' professional comportment in the classroom and as members of academic communities; its explicit references to ethical behavior appear under the principles of minimizing harm and providing benefits to students and colleagues. CPRE addresses ethical issues in a

2023 report coinciding with the commission's 50th anniversary (Toth & Bourland, 2023). This report includes ethics among seven key areas for which the commission offers recommendations under the theme of navigating change. The CPRE report follows updated recommendations issued by the commission's ethics committee the previous year (Bortree, 2022). The 2022 recommendations highlight themes including navigating misinformation in crisis and disaster communication, critical thinking and ethical decision-making, and courage and confidence in addressing ethical issues. The committee called for greater urgency for these concerns within course content in response to issues that emerged since its previous report in 2018-2019.

Professional Resources

Ethical codes presented by leading industry organizations seemingly address issues of (mis/dis)information implicitly. For example, industry professionals may extrapolate a sense of their obligations regarding (mis/dis)information from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Code of Ethics. The code addresses (mis/dis)information indirectly through its emphasis on the professional values of advocacy, which identifies a responsibility to facilitate "informed public debate;" honesty, which holds members of the profession to "accuracy and truth;" and loyalty, which includes "obligation to the public interest" (PRSA, n.d.). Interestingly, guidelines under the code's six provisions of conduct are prefaced with statements of intent, instilling a telos toward ethical decision-making (and presumably, away from (mis/dis)information) applicable to specific circumstances or dilemmas. In a similar vein, the professional charter of the Public Relations and Communication Association (PRCA) takes a similarly expansive approach toward (mis/dis) information. For example, the 2019 update of the charter charges members with a "positive duty" toward ethical standards, requiring members not to "disseminate false or misleading information knowingly or recklessly" and "use proper care to avoid doing so inadvertently" (Public Relations and Communication Association, 2016).

In essence, public relations professionals, akin to the codes of ethics of their counterparts in advertising (American Advertising Federation), journalism (Society of Professional Journalists), and marketing (American Marketing Association), are called to uphold ethical principles outlined in industry-specific codes focused on being transparent and honest while not always directly mentioning the topic of (mis/dis) information.

Research Question

This research endeavored to explore the perspectives and experiences of public relations professionals, aiming to shed light on the coverage of ethical issues within educational programs, with a particular focus on addressing (mis/dis)information. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, PR professionals play a pivotal role in navigating the complexities of information dissemination. The research seeks to identify the skills essential for PR professionals to effectively manage (mis/dis)information and the resources that facilitate ongoing professional development and education in this dynamic environment. Thus, this study asked the following research question:

RQ: How are PR professionals learning about and preparing for situations that involve (mis/dis)information?

Method

Due to the type of research question that was asked, qualitative methods were chosen to address the lines of inquiry. Qualitative methods reveal how people make meaning of their lived experiences and are useful when phenomena have undiscovered insights or theory development remains at a nascent stage (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, this paper relied on in-depth interviews to capture public relations professionals' perceptions of how they learn about and prepare for (mis/dis)information..

Researcher Positionality Statement

Before outlining the method steps, it is important to provide the positionality of the research team. This helps contextualize our study, so that the reader understands how our lived experiences contributed to data collection and analysis. We are a research team based at a large southeastern university. Collectively, we have 26 years of industry experience in agencies and consultancies, non-profits, and higher education. In addition, we have a total of 34 years as educators at small, regional universities and large, flagship campuses. As insiders to both the practice of public relations and educating future professionals, these experiences shape how we see the world and how we approached this project, including the conversations with our participants.

Sampling Approach

The sampling procedures for this study took a purposive approach. Purposive sampling is useful in recruiting participants who have robust experiences with the phenomenon under investigation and can share narratives related to those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These "information-rich cases" provide the researcher with a sample that shares detailed and valuable insights to help answer the research question (p. 96). The purposive sample for this study included public relations professionals who had experience with (mis/dis)information.

In addition to purposive sampling, criterion-based sampling was used. To be included in the study, participants needed to be public relations professionals located in the U.S. and members of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). The established criteria ensured that the sample had knowledge of PRSA's code of ethics, experiences with (mis/dis)information, and awareness of higher education practices in the U.S. Recruitment concluded once saturation was reached, which was when no new insights were shared during the interviews. Specifically, once the participants repeatedly shared similar information and information redundancy was present during the final few interviews, the research team felt comfortable concluding data collection.

The final sample included 16 professionals, three men and 13 women, who practiced public relations in the U.S. The goal of the sample was to achieve maximum variation in perspectives and experiences, which enables the transferability of the study's findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participant tenure ranged from nine months to eight years with their current employers. Many of the participants worked for public relations agencies (n=10), while others worked freelance (n=1), in-house (n=1), for non-profit organizations (n=1), and for media companies (n=3). Many of the agencies in which the participants worked for are well-known, global organizations. To balance these perspectives, we sought to include those who work in-house or for specialized, boutique firms. Participants were also located across the U.S., residing in New York, Texas, Iowa, Georgia, Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, and California. Positions of the participants included account supervisor, director, account executive, manager, consultant, vice president, marketing director, and senior consultant. The sample demographics illustrate that maximum variation was achieved.

Data Collection Approach

To answer the research question, this study relied on in-depth interviews. The interview is an ideal data collection tool to allow participants to share their opinions, perceptions and lived experiences (McCracken, 1988). The semi-structured interview allowed the researchers to capture the meaning associated with the lived experiences of public relations professionals to arrive at insights related to the skills and resources needed to navigate (mis/dis)information.

To begin, participants were asked to fill out and sign an IRB-approved informed consent, which ensured they were willing to be audio recorded. All participants confirmed they were comfortable being audio recorded. Once confirmed, interviews were scheduled at a date and time that was most convenient for the participants. Next, interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform, where the audio record function was used to capture the conversation. When the interviews were finished, the audio component of the interview was uploaded to a password-protected, cloud-based server. The interviews ranged from 27 to 67 minutes; the average interview was 46 minutes. The 736 minutes or over 12 hours of data resulted in 177 single-spaced transcript pages. Four research assistants transcribed the audio recordings after signing an IRB-approved confidentiality form.

In terms of the interviews, the conversation started broadly and then transitioned to more specific questions. Throughout, prompts and probes were used to encourage greater details in participant responses. All interviews began with building rapport, which helped make the participants feel more comfortable in sharing their thoughts and experiences. Next, participants were asked to share their professional background, where they currently work, and for how long. Specific questions related to skills and training to handle (mis/dis)information were asked next. For example, participants were asked: Do you see a clear link between your role within PR and the issue of limiting (mis/dis)information? Please explain. How were you informed about this link (i.e., boss, previous education)? How prepared do you think recent public relations graduates are for the challenges (mis/dis)information brings? What assistance or tools would help you navigate or deal with (mis/dis) information? What do you think is the most important action a practitioner can take to deal with (mis/dis)information?

Data Analysis Approach

Using a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), NVivo for Mac, data were analyzed inductively. Inductive data analysis uses observations to develop conceptualizations of patterns to arrive at themes that are supported by tentative claims. These emergent themes are how the research question was answered by the data. In addition, Microsoft Excel was used for further developing the categories, which led to the development of the themes. It is important to note that the software does not actually complete the data analysis, but instead provides a way to organize data and maintain rigor.

Data analysis included five steps. One research team member oversaw steps one through three, and all team members participated in steps four and five. This approach ensured credibility and consistency of the findings. Step one was to view the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings to ensure accuracy. Reviewing the transcripts was essential since each research team member conducted a set of interviews. In addition, the interviews were transcribed by four people. Step two included open coding of the data. Open coding is when the researcher labels every word and phrase that is relevant to the research question with a code. In total, there were 84 open codes. Step three combined the repetitive codes by collapsing them into one code or category, which resulted in 14 codes. Step four focused on theme development by continuing to reduce the data; four themes emerged from the data to answer the research question. Steps one and two were conducted in NVivo, and steps three and four were completed in Microsoft Excel. The last step was to ensure themes were clear, consistent, and exhaustive across all participant experiences. Peer debriefing sessions, reviewing existing scholarship, and revisiting the original transcripts were used to confirm the emergent themes and findings. Specifically, the peer debriefing sessions allowed the research team to work through discrepancies and disagreements about the emergent themes. When needed, existing scholarship was brought into the discussion to help explain arguments or examples from the data were used to illustrate certain points; this process helped us critically assess each theme. The following section discusses the findings in relation to the proposed research question.

Findings

The proposed research question asked how public relations professionals are learning about and educating themselves to deal with situations that involve (mis/dis)information. Four themes emerged from the data. The first theme explained that most of the training professionals receive, as it relates to (mis/dis)information, occurs in real time, which means they are learning on the job. This leads professionals to develop an informal process of their own to navigate these situations, which is theme two. Additionally, professionals lean on soft skills to prepare for (mis/disinformation), which helps with staying nimble in such complex situations. Last, professionals provided ideas for resources, which serves as a starting point since preparing for (mis/dis)information is a complex process; this is theme four. All themes are discussed next and supported with evidence from participants.

Learning on the Job, in Real Time

The evidence for the first theme illustrated that most professionals are learning on the job informally, with no formal education. A senior consultant at a media company explained, "the root of disinformation is people. And so you can't learn in a book, or in a classroom…a lot of that is experience." Specifically, participants were asked about the protocols their agencies have in place to deal with (mis/dis)information and many shared that formal processes and protocols do not exist. A marketing director shared, "[the training] is more informal and honestly very opinion-based I would say, like a very individual base." An account executive for an agency said, "I mean some of [the protocols] are organic, and we all just kind of share it, and let the conversation flow that way." An agency director said, "I would say [the protocols] are more informal; we don't have any specific protocols on how we handle something." A director for a media company said, "we don't have protocols, per se." An account executive explained, "I think it's definitely individualized to, you know, there's no, like, formalized protocol for that."

Because training is informal and companies/agencies do not have a formal protocol to address (mis/dis)information, most participants talked about the fact that each situation is treated as new and unique. A senior consultant at a media company said, “we don’t have anything formal in place. It is usually case by case.” A freelance publicist also talked about how it is a “case-by-case scenario.” The fact that the learning process is informal, many of the participants explained the steps they take to prepare for the complexity of navigating (mis/dis)information, which is discussed next in theme two.

Developing a Process

For theme two, the evidence demonstrated that since professionals are learning on the job, they are preparing by developing their own process to deal with (mis/dis)information. Participants discussed how they begin by researching sources and information to identify (mis/dis)information; this also includes differentiating between fact and opinion. The next step is to understand sources and audiences and then finally to deliver strong messages.

As mentioned in theme one, many organizations and agencies do not have a formal process in place to deal with (mis/dis)information and many educational resources are not available, which makes learning difficult. An account executive said, “I will scour the online sources almost daily to find something to forward on because honestly there’s no resources to send over to the teams.” A program manager shared similar insights and said, “there truly isn’t a ton of education provided, and I wish there was. There’s not a ton of education provided at all in our agency… In terms of any additional coursework, it’s whatever we’re able to find online.” Therefore, professionals are left to create their own strategic approach.

For many of the professionals in this study, the process begins with some form of research. A director for a PR agency also talked about the value of research on the front end and said, "I would say the most important action you can take in dealing with it…is probably the step before dealing with it, which is 'research' to really, really understand what the argument is." Within this context, taking a research approach is focused on doing the legwork to be able to identify (mis/dis)information. A director for a small PR agency explained, "to navigate it, obviously I think the first thing.. [is] to be able to recognize it." Participants discussed how they take it upon themselves to screen information to research whether or not it is (mis/dis)information. A senior consultant at an agency explained, "I've taken it upon myself, and I think a few of my colleagues that I work with right now to do our own research and our own reading about ethics in the industry… not a formal training by any means." Here, the participant is referring to research as secondary research, reviewing what is already available versus collecting primary research.

In addition, research helps professionals identify logical fallacies to differentiate between fact and opinion. An account manager stated, "I think understanding logical fallacies is important and it's something that I don't think a lot of PR professionals navigate regularly… So, if we don't have those tools in our arsenal to be able to evaluate what our clients are saying, then I think that we are more likely to be the vessel for disinformation spreading." This means that professionals need to be able to consume lots of different information from different sources as part of the research, as explained by an account supervisor who said, "I would say obviously an ability to multi-task and take in lots of different information" is crucial.

Starting with research aids professionals in identifying credible sources as the next step in the process.An account executive discussed how "making sure you have the correct information on hand and readily available, and you have credible sources to look to" is a key. A program manager also shared the value of having credible sources and said, "I think that is the biggest key: to know your sources, and then having basic trust skills, knowing your sources."

The third step is to see how proactive and reactive response strategies will be received by audiences. A director for a PR agency explained:

> Folks need to be able to quickly put themselves in the position of the audiences with the general public that the brand is trying to reach and do an assessment on you know how this is going to be received... you have to be able to switch back and forth really easily and put on your PR pro hat and your general public hat and say okay I'm stepping back and I am receiving this message what are the problems that I could potentially foresee and then switch back over to the PR pro.

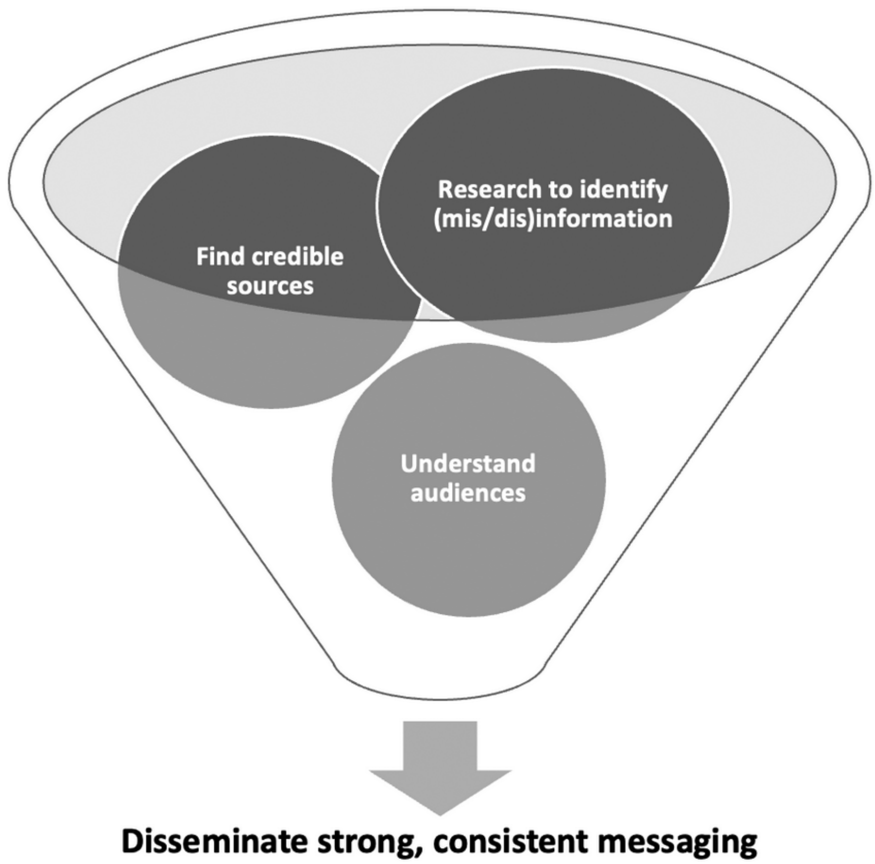
A vice president for a PR agency also talked about how audience research is a crucial step that leads to strategy. He said, "it's important to determine not only who the stakeholders are and where they lie, but the level of importance. Can they be moved or not? That has to play into your decision making on how you put together a response."

Having executed the research on the front end allows for the construction and dissemination of strong, consistent messaging, which is the final step of the process. A director for a PR agency shared, "being able to deliver strong messages and messages that resonate is an important skill to have…something that's not fluff, something that isn't timid. Being able to deliver those strong messages that stand up to disinformation." An account manager said, "using as many channels as you can, trying to use your own organic voice when possible, but then also tapping into media when you can trust the reporters that you're working with, I think that's really the best way to go about it."

The process that emerges is illustrated in Figure 1. The process is not linear and some stages may come before others depending on the situation. In addition, each professional might have different steps they would include that are not mentioned here. Yet, the professionals provided suggestions for an initial approach. Ultimately, the purpose of the process is for professionals to develop and disseminate strong, consistent messaging on behalf of their organization or client.

Figure 1

The professional process: Leaning on soft skills



In addition to the skill of developing a process, participants discussed the various soft skills needed to navigate (mis/dis)information. Most of the soft skills mentioned by professionals focused on critical thinking, understanding, problem solving, attitudes, and ethics. These core attributes are often inherent for individuals and are needed given the complexity of preparing for (mis/dis)information. For example, a freelance publicist shared about the value of curiosity and said, “I feel like the core skill, I think the biggest skill is to have that curiosity to want to research and not take things at face value.” An agency director talked about empathy and shared, “if you don’t have empathy, and you can’t actively put yourself in different positions then PR is not for you. If you don’t have that, and it’s not really something you can teach… then you won’t last long in PR.” A nonprofit consultant reinforced the value of being decisive and said, “the biggest thing is just being decisive and forward thinking.” Two other participants talked about having the ability to examine facts with a calm demeanor. An in-house marketing manager said, “the most important thing that they should keep in mind is not let your emotions run wild.” A senior consultant for a media company said, “You know you really just have to address things calmly and factually.”

Since (mis/dis)information often has an ethical component, the moral compass of the professional is pivotal. An agency director talked about “the difference in right/wrong and having those morals, those ethics that you not only have as a human being but you have as a public relations professional.” An account supervisor shared, “being able to kind of keep that ethics hat on at all times is really key, so that we are looking at it through that lens.” When guided by a strong moral compass, a professional is more willing to up and out against disinformation. A marketing director said, “see something, say something. Not only say something, but do something.”

Soft skills make traditional education somewhat challenging since most of these skills are either inherent (curiosity, empathy, strong moral compass) or from experience (decisiveness, a calm demeanor). Therefore, participants talked about the value of learning from professional mentors to help develop soft skills. An account executive said, “I think joining a small firm like I did, having that close relationship with my boss and the founder of the company who had decades of experience definitely helped influence how I operate and move throughout the public relations world." A freelance publicist shared, "I've been very blessed to have mentors within the PR space that have had a lot of experience dealing with different crises…So I've usually taken gems from them and have learned how to really navigate this space."

Starting Point for Resources

Participants were asked to share possible resources to help students and professionals learn about and prepare for (mis/dis)information. It is important to note that given the complexity of the (mis/dis)information phenomenon, these resources are a starting point of what professionals think is needed. It is hard to state explicitly everything that is needed given that each encounter with (mis/dis)information is nuanced and unique. Therefore, resources that have yet to be identified do potentially exist and will most likely be uncovered in real time.

Resources for Students

The professionals in this study provided suggestions to equip the next generation of students with the tools and resources to learn about and prepare for (mis/dis)information. One suggestion was to ensure students have access to professionals. However, the professionals need to provide a realistic view of what it means to work in public relations. Often, professionals present the "best" parts of the field to students, without describing the challenging and mundane parts of the job. An account executive spoke from her own experience and explained:

> I think the integration of actual professionals within these classroom settings is vital. A lot of the stuff I didn't know until I got here, and I was doing it, and I was tossed out of the frying pan and into the fire. And I think that's how I grew, and so I think advocating a realistic view of the PR world from people who are in it can only help…It's hard because not every day is a splashy client story, right? There are tough stories. So, it's about getting a balance of, you know, the really cool projects you've done versus the really mundane projects you've done versus the crappy projects you've done. Showing that it's not all Samantha Jones in Sex and the City,

> sometimes it's just grinding through another day, but making sure that your client comes out on top; a realistic perspective of the public relations industry.

Another suggestion was to ensure students take ethics courses as part of their degree program. An account supervisor for an agency said, "I would hope given everything that has happened in the last couple of years that they're taking a PR ethics course." An in-house marketing manager encouraged the use of case studies based on real events and said, "I think the best way to learn is case studies." A freelance publicist proposed training that teaches students to unbiasedly read the news. She said, "They do spend a lot of time on social media, which is where they usually get their news. So I think by preparing them is to teach them how to look at news unbiasedly…we tend to be biased and gravitate towards what naturally aligns with our beliefs."

Resources for Professionals

Participants also discussed various resources that professionals use to learn about and prepare for (mis/dis)information. The most frequently mentioned tools included webinars, case studies, templates, and fact-checking websites. For example, participants suggested interactive webinars that focused on real-life examples would be useful. A senior consultant said, "an interactive workshop would also be interesting, just so you can hear some more real-life examples." An account manager said, "I think the most impactful would be a panel setting, either virtual or in person, where you can hear from an individual but also see examples, maybe read some headlines, see some social media posts, to really get an understanding." A vice president said, "it would be a really good [to have a] speaker series or online roundtable discussion… I personally would be intrigued to see discussions at various different levels of participation or levels of experience." Based on the comments, it is evident that having a workshop that includes dialogue and examples is key.

Building on the need for examples, participants talked about the value of case studies being easily accessible or part of an interactive event. A senior consultant for a media company said, "I always love case studies examples. I get nothing will ever be cookie cutter like we could do the exact same thing, but I love hearing how other people have handled situations and what they've learned from it." An account supervisor suggested, "sourcing from publications that target the industry, so like PRWeek, PR News, where there might be recent stories or case studies on where someone was presented with the challenge that they were able to solve." An agency director suggested, "looking at case studies on a global basis, something that everyone can relate to whether that be through a workshop or seminar here locally."

Also shared among the professionals in this study was the need for resources, specifically a fact-checking website and templates to follow when being confronted with (mis/dis)information. Many participants shared how their agency or company did not have a standard operating procedure for dealing with (mis/dis)information, and therefore, a template would be helpful. An account executive shared, "maybe a general kind of SOP…on how to handle the situations." A nonprofit consultant also talked about the value of having a template. The other resource mentioned by professionals was a fact-checking website or clearing house to confirm whether or not information is truthful. This resource may be a bit harder to come by, but still something that would help professionals remain agile. A program manager explained, "I think it would be easier if you could plug it into a website, and it was red for yes, this is disinformation… and green if it was good to go, and you could use it." An agency vice president suggested:

> Maybe there's some way in this day and age to have a clearinghouse of data and a clearinghouse of topics that would provide a range of information. With descriptions of the non-biased middle perspective of a PRSA…or someone that's not representing

an ownership group of anybody or being beholden to any client or any group to be able to say with some level of clarity this information is true.

In conclusion to the research question, participants shared how they are learning on the job to prepare for (mis/dis)information. Many organizations and agencies do not have formal training or protocols in place for professionals, which leads them to develop their own process to ensure messaging to audiences is strategic and effective. Given the informal, yet complex nature of navigating (mis/dis)information, participants discussed how they rely on their soft skills. Additionally, participants shared resources for students and professionals to learn about and prepare for (mis/dis)information. These suggestions are a starting point, knowing that more resources will be identified in real time, based on the particulars of a given situation that involves (mis/dis)information.

Discussion

The findings from this research study uncover crucial insights into the skills and resources necessary for public relations professionals to effectively navigate situations involving (mis/dis)information. Marked by the intricacies of the post-truth era, the study reveals the multifaceted nature of skills required by PR professionals through four key themes.

Firstly, the predominant mode of learning is on the job in real-time, with professionals acquiring knowledge through practical experience rather than formal education. This approach, as emphasized by participants, is rooted in the belief that the complexity of (mis/dis)information cannot be adequately addressed through classroom learning alone. Secondly, due to the lack of formal training and protocols within organizations, professionals are compelled to develop their own processes to navigate (mis/dis)information. This involves steps such as researching sources, differentiating between fact and opinion, understanding audiences, and delivering strong messages (figure 1). The absence of standardized procedures requires practitioners to approach each situation uniquely, as articulated by participants who emphasized the case-by-case nature of their responses.

In addition, findings highlight the significance of soft skills, accentuating the complex ethical terrain that PR professionals navigate. Skills like curiosity, empathy, the ability to maintain a calm demeanor, decisiveness, and a strong moral compass are paramount for addressing (mis/dis)information ethically and responsibly. This dimension of PR practice often evolves through hands-on experience, emphasizing the challenge of imparting these soft skills through formal education alone. Hence, experiential learning and mentorship play a pivotal role in honing these competencies, emphasizing their practical value in real-world PR scenarios.

Lastly, participants suggested resources for both students and professionals to learn about and prepare for (mis/dis)information. Recommendations for students included integrating professionals who share narratives that focus on all parts of the job into classroom settings, emphasizing ethics courses, and using case studies based on real events. Professionals, on the other hand, could benefit from resources such as interactive webinars, panel discussions, case studies, fact-checking websites, and templates. The findings acknowledge that the evolving nature of (mis/dis)information requires ongoing identification and incorporation of new resources in real-time, all of which contribute to PR professionals' agility and readiness to combat the evolving challenges of (mis/dis)information.

Ultimately, this research reinforces the holistic blend of practical and soft skills, along with ongoing learning and collaboration, as the cornerstone of effective (mis/dis)information management in the ever-changing PR landscape.

Establishing Disinformation Skills: The Holistic Professional

This study highlights the multifaceted and holistic nature of skills and resources required by public relations professionals to navigate (mis/dis)information effectively. From this study, it becomes evident that education surrounding the public relations field must move beyond the dichotomy of hard vs. soft skills to aid professionals in the ability to navigate the public relations industry. It is not simply a matter of hard vs. soft skills but rather a holistic blend of practical and soft skills. Additional findings emphasize the need for experiential learning, ethics-focused education, and easily accessible online resources to ensure PR professionals are well-equipped to address false truths in today's complex media landscape. In addition, where new forms of (mis/dis)information constantly emerge, the ability to learn from the experiences and insights of peers is invaluable. Participants in this study discussed the benefits of sharing strategies, best practices, and ethical approaches for addressing (mis/dis)information effectively. This collaborative approach can enhance the collective preparedness of the PR industry in dealing with this challenge.

Our findings underscore the multifaceted nature of the skills and resources needed by public relations professionals to navigate (mis/dis)information effectively. Professionals must be adept at vetting information sources, distinguishing between fact and opinion, understanding their target audiences, and delivering credible messages. Simultaneously, they require soft skills such as curiosity, empathy, maintaining a calm demeanor, decisiveness, and a strong moral compass to address (mis/dis)information ethically and responsibly. PR education should strive to cultivate holistic professionals who are well-equipped to navigate the multifaceted challenges of (mis/dis)information in today's complex media landscape. Doing so will help ensure that PR professionals are not only prepared, but also empowered to address (mis/dis)information effectively, upholding the integrity and credibility of the industry.

Implications for PR Educators in Higher Education

Drawing from Rittel and Webber's (1973) concept of "wicked problems," or complex problems that defy simple resolution and frequently signify the presence of other complex problems, Jack (2019) argues that misinformation, disinformation, and fake news should be considered "wicked content" as a way of acknowledging the interrelated social issues that contribute to its rise and distinguish it from propaganda. Yet, despite the view of wicked problems as intractable, public relations educators in higher education settings have resources that can prepare students to understand and partially mitigate the problem of (mis/dis) information. Fortunately, many of these are variations or expansions of pedagogical strategies that many instructors have already found valuable.

One such approach is for PR professors to collaborate with faculty who teach moral philosophy or applied ethics to develop modules, lesson plans, and thought exercises that introduce students in both disciplines to ethical principles and expose them to complex ethical dilemmas related to (mis/dis)information. Such interdisciplinary collaboration has the potential to help students form broad, practical understandings of ethics beyond a general sense that deception is unethical. For example, Bowen (2016) observed a need for clarity and standardization regarding the definitions of ethical considerations in public relations and recommended the use of terms from moral philosophy to do so, arguing that such clarity will produce more effective practitioners who can better understand the difference between what is legal and what is moral. This has the potential to enhance students' personal and professional abilities to contribute to societal benefit—particularly, Bowen argues, in a communication environment that requires interactions with content creators who may lack ethical training.

The use of case studies—a staple of public relations pedagogy—may also be enhanced through engagement with philosophy. For example, how might PR educators adapt a version of Foot's Trolley Dilemma

(Foot, 1967) to explore questions such as: how to ethically prioritize the concerns of various publics, how practitioners incorporate understandings of free will into combatting (mis/dis)information and fake news, and what values or principles should guide our advice to leadership when a mutually beneficial outcome, a win-win, is not possible.

Educators can also expose students to professionals who can speak frankly about the tough ethical decisions they have faced—the cases that defied easy resolutions and perhaps still keep them up at night. Alternatively, because professional resources on this topic are comparatively nascent, it may be useful to ask guest professionals to discuss how they are applying existing ethical principles or problem-solving heuristics to this new context. Scholars including Anderson (1999) and Hughes Miller (2014) have observed that guest speakers can expose students to the latest developments in the field and broaden their perspectives. However, an unreflective use of industry guest speakers may not have the intended positive effect (Anderson, 1999). The mere presence of guest speakers does not guarantee relevance to the topic, alignment with course objectives, or student engagement (Lang, 2008). This may be particularly true for emerging topics such as (mis/dis) information. Therefore, strategies such as attention to speaker selection and connecting speakers' presentations to specific follow-up assignments (Roush, 2013), along with advance coordination with speakers on alignment with course objectives, provision of examples, and active presentation style (Merle & Craig, 2017), may ensure that students receive the intended benefit. Additionally, teachers can guide students to ask probing questions of professionals that generate insights beyond the facts of the case, or design brief, in-class writing exercises to encourage students to reflect on speakers' remarks and draw connections with other class materials. While exposure to industry professionals does not substitute for experiential, on-the-job learning, it can be a way of helping students understand the complexities of public relations and examine their own moral compasses in preparation for future professional roles..

Implications for PR Educators Beyond the Classroom

Professional public relations organizations like the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) play an important role in ongoing education for members, particularly on emergent issues. Through training materials such as webinars, regular publications, and networking opportunities, these and other organizations provide resources beyond formal education; they also assist practitioners in maintaining relevant skills in a changing environment (Nichols, 2023).

Such organizations highlight the role of ethics in responsible, professional practice through emphasis months (for example, PRSA observes September as “Ethics Month”), position papers, and advisories, as well as through the codes of ethics they promote. Given its influence in promoting professionalism within the field nationally and internationally, these organizations may consider addressing (mis/dis)information more explicitly in their ethics codes to manage this emerging yet persistent concern. It is important to note that while PRSA published an ethical standards advisory (ESA) regarding misinformation in December 2021, no participants explicitly mentioned it. This suggests opportunities to more deeply engage professionals with emergent ESAs in the future, or to consider other formats for engaging professionals around emerging ethical issues outside of or in complement to the ESA format.

In addition to refreshing codes of ethics in light of the prevalence of (mis/dis)information, professional organizations can advise members on how to influence the environments where they work to foster a cultural climate where practitioners are not merely equipped, but also empowered, to recognize and combat these practices. Given the importance of organizational culture in shaping norms (Kuye et al., 2013), academics and practitioners can focus attention on how to develop and maintain organizational cultures where communicators can, to quote one of our participants, “not only say something, but do something” when they are confronted with (mis/dis)information. To support such environments bolsters our quest to serve society as well as the people, organizations, and causes for whom we work.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although this study affords a snapshot of professional experiences and perceptions related to (mis/dis)information training and management, it is not without limitations. The current research only focused on those professionals who are current members of the Public Relations Society of America. Although PRSA is the largest professional association for public relations practitioners, practitioners are not required to adhere to a professional code of ethics, let alone PRSA’s code of ethics. PRSA’s code of ethics were focused on due to the organization’s scale, scope, and influence in the public relations industry. Future research should consider professionals who may or may not affiliate with PRSA to examine commonalities and differences in behaviors, experiences, and perceptions. Similarly, a useful comparison point in future research might be examining the perspective of accredited professionals, in particular, to discern how formal professional development activities may influence professionals’ ability to navigate emergent ethical issues.

In addition, the majority of the sample in this study consisted of participants who worked for public relations agencies; perhaps more diversity in the representation of participants’ industries would yield varied findings. To that end, about 80% of our sample consisted of self-identified women; although this may be a limitation of the current approach, the gender breakdown resembles the PR workforce (Bardhan & Gower, 2020). Additionally, the highest level of education was not collected during the interviews. Nonetheless, future research should continue to articulate how education and training may best equip students and practitioners for managing emergent professional ethical issues, such as those arising from (mis/dis)information. Future research should build from this formative work to assess broader, and perhaps more generalizable, attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, education, and experiences among professionals and to directly observe and measure the impact of different educational and training interventions on student and professional readiness and ability to navigate (mis/dis)information.

Conclusion

Findings from this research shed light on the intricate landscape of skills and resources required for public relations professionals to adeptly navigate the challenges posed by (mis/dis)information. Results emphasizing real-time, on-the-job learning underscore the belief that the intricacies of (mis/dis)information cannot be comprehensively addressed through traditional classroom education alone. Secondly, the absence of formal training and protocols necessitates professionals to craft their own processes, engaging in steps like researching sources and delivering strategic messages on a case-by-case basis. Furthermore, the study underscores the pivotal role of soft skills, such as curiosity, empathy, and ethical awareness, in negotiating the complex ethical landscape of (mis/dis)information. These skills often evolve through experiential learning and mentorship, emphasizing their practical significance in real-world public relations scenarios.

Moreover, the research highlights the practical recommendations for resources that can equip both students and professionals to grapple with (mis/dis)information effectively. The evolving nature of (mis/dis)information calls for continuous identification and integration of new resources in real-time, contributing to the agility and readiness of public relations professionals in facing these challenges. Ultimately, the study advocates for a holistic approach to skills development, recognizing the interplay of practical and soft skills, experiential learning, ethics-focused education, and readily available online resources as essential components in preparing PR professionals to navigate the complex media landscape successfully.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Participant sample demographics (U.S. professionals)

Gender	Tenure with current employer	Type of organization	Size of organization	U.S. State	Position
13 women 3 men	9 months - 8 years	Public Relations (10) Freelance (1) In-house (1) Nonprofit (1) Media Companies (3)	1,000+ employees (2) >200 employees (2) <200 employees (10) Other (2)	New York Texas Iowa Georgia Hawaii Pennsyvania Maryland Kentucky Tenneessee California	Account supervisor Director Account executive Manager Consultant Vice president Marketing director Senior consultant

Table 2

Emergent Theme 2: Developing a Process

Description	Skills	Exemplar Quotes
Practical skills are needed to deal with (mis/dis)information.	1. Research to be able to identify (mis/dis)information	"I've taken it upon myself, and I think a few of my colleagues that I work with right now to do our own research and our own reading about ethics in the industry…not a formal training by any means."
	2. Research to identify logical fallacies and to differentiate between fact and opinion	"I think understanding logical fallacies is important and it's something that I don't think a lot of PR professionals navigate regularly…So, if we don't have those tools in our arsenal to be able to evaluate what our clients are saying, then I think that we are more likely to be the vessel for disinformation spreading."
	3. Understanding the audience	"Folks need to be able to quickly put themselves in the position of the audiences with the general public that the brand is trying to reach and do an assessment on you know how this is going to be received…you have to be able to switch back and forth really easily and put on your PR pro hat and your general public hat and say okay I'm stepping back and I am receiving this message what are the problems that I could potentially foresee and then switch back over to the PR pro."

Table 3

Emergent Theme 3: Leaning on Soft Skills

Description	Skills	Exemplar Quotes
Various soft skills are needed to navigate (mis/dis)information.	1. Curiousity	"I feel like the core skill, I think the biggest skill is to have that curiosity to want to research and not take things at face value."
	2. Empathy	"If you don't have empathy and you can't actively put yourself in different positions then PR is not for you. If you don't have that, and it's not really something you can teach…then you won't last long in PR."
	3. Decisiveness	"The biggest thing is just being decisive and forward-thinking."
	4. Calm demeanor	"You know you really just have to address things calmly and factually."
	5. Moral compass	"[T]he difference in right/wrong and having those morals, those ethics that you not only have as a human being but you have as a public relations professional."
	6. Learning on the job and from professional mentors	"I've been very blessed to have mentors within the PR space that have had a lot of experience dealing with different crises…So I've usually taken gems from them and have learned how to really navigate this space."

Table 4

Emergent Theme 4: Ideas for resources

Description	Skills	Exemplar Quotes
Several resources can help students develop skills to manage (mis/dis)information.	1. Ensure students have access to professionals.	"I think the integration of actual professionals within these classroom settings is vital. A lot of the stuff I didn't know until I got here, and I was doing it, and I was tossed out of the frying pan and into the fire. And I think that's how I grew, and so I think advocating a realistic view of the PR world from people who are in it can only help."
.	2. Ensure students take an ethics course as part of their degree program.	"I would hope given everything that has happened in the last couple of years that they're taking a PR ethics course."
	3. Teach case studies based on real events.	"I always love case studies examples. I get nothing will ever be cookie cutter like we could do the exact same thing, but I love hearing how other people have handled situations and what they've learned from it."
	4. Provide students with training to unbiasedly read the news.	"They do spend a lot of time on social media, which is where they usually get their news. So I think by preparing them is to teach them how to look at news unbiasedly…we tend to be biased and gravitate towards what naturally aligns with our beliefs."
	5. Create webinars, case studies, templates, and fact-checking websites for professionals.	"I think the most impactful would be a panel setting, either virtual or in-person, where you can hear from an individual but also see examples, maybe read some headlines, see some social media posts, to really get an understanding."

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Long Interview Guide

Introduction and Basic Points

Good [morning/afternoon/evening], my name is [], and I am an [assistant/associate] professor at. I am working on a research project in collaboration with PRSA's Voices4Everyone initiative that focuses on perceptions and understanding of disinformation within the public relations industry. Your experiences will help us understand more about these topic areas and allow us to share insights pertaining to the public relations industry.

(Repeat these points if individuals have questions about the consent forms they have signed)

- Every opinion is valuable and I only want to know your thoughts and opinions.
- Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You may choose to skip a question or stop the interview at any time and for any reason with no penalty, especially if you feel uncomfortable with the question or subject. Your information will stay secure. I will not share your personal information, including your name, with anyone else. Unless you prefer otherwise, your name will not be linked to the information that you provide during the interview.
- This interview is being audio-recorded in case I need to listen to it later to clarify something from the notes. This recording will not be shared with others and will be destroyed at the end of this research.
- The interview should take no longer than an hour.
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your professional background, including where you are now?
    a. What is your current position, and how long have you been with the agency?

Defining disinformation

1. What comes to mind when you hear the term misinformation?
2. What comes to mind when you hear the term disinformation?
3. From your perspective, what is the difference between misinformation and disinformation?
4. What role do you think PR professionals play in discrediting or thwarting disinformation?
    a. How important do you think it is for PR professionals to inform clients that certain ideas might be disinformation?
5. When do you feel disinformation became prevalent for PR professionals?
6. What is the media's role in disinformation?
7. Do you see a clear link between your role within PR and the issue of limiting disinformation? Please explain. How were you informed about this link (i.e., boss, previous education)?

Note: In the event that participants are unsure, we might suggest that disinformation is false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.

I am now going to transition to a few questions about your actual experiences in learning about disinformation and possible client interactions you feel comfortable sharing. Please remember the information you share here is confidential.

Attitudes and Experience with Disinformation

1. Have you ever experienced a situation with a client that included disinformation? Can you walk me through that situation?
2. Could you please provide an example of disinformation from your experience as a practitioner or one you have observed within the field of public relations?

3. Has a client ever knowingly or unknowingly asked your agency to create a disinformation-based campaign or strategy? Can you please walk me through that experience? What were you thinking/feeling? How did you navigate such a difficult situation with the client? What helped guide your response?
4. Has one of your clients experienced a disinformation-based attack from a third party? If so, what was your recommendation to the client?
5. Can you provide an example of how you have navigated conversations regarding disinformation or intentional deception with fellow employees at your agency?

I am now going to ask a few questions about your agency's protocols regarding disinformation.

Agency Protocols

1. What protocols does your agency have in place to deal with disinformation?
   a. How do you vet potential pieces of disinformation?
   b. Does the agency have policies regarding the use of disinformation? If so, can you describe these policies?
   c. What steps are taken to ensure that sources of information are credible?
   d. What policies are in place to help clients' that are experiencing a disinformation-based attack from a third party?
   e. What do you think is missing from your agency's disinformation protocols?

Now for a few questions about your education, training, and available industry resources you use to deal with disinformation.

Educational Background

1. What training have you received regarding disinformation, and where has it come from?
   a. Does your agency provide any training or education to employees regarding disinformation? If so, please explain.

   b. What training or education do you think would be helpful for your agency to provide regarding disinformation?
2. What do you see as the core skills needed to navigate the topic of disinformation within the PR industry?
3. How prepared do you think recent public relations graduates are for the challenges disinformation brings?
   a. Are there any areas you see for improvement?

PRSA/Industry Standards and Ethics

1. Are there clear guidelines to help the PR industry and practitioners deal with disinformation? If so, can you describe these guidelines?
2. What do you think are the weaknesses within the PR industry when it comes to disinformation?
3. What type of resources would be helpful for PRSA to provide to help you navigate topics surrounding disinformation?
4. How often do you refer to PRSA's code of ethics? What do you think could make these guidelines more helpful?

Perceptions of Response Tools

1. What assistance or tools would help you navigate or deal with disinformation?
2. What do you think is the most important action a practitioner can take to deal with disinformation?
3. Do you think proactive communication is helpful in responding to disinformation? If so, please explain.
   a. Are you familiar with inoculation? If so, please explain in your own words.
   b, Are you familiar with prebunking? If so, please explain in your own words.

That's all the questions I have. Is there anything that you feel I left out or did not ask about that would be important for me to know regarding disinformation?

Lastly, is there anyone you could recommend to be included in this study? Our only requirement is that they are a member of PRSA.

Closing

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Would you be willing to be contacted again in the future should I need to conduct a follow-up interview at a later date? In addition, can I contact you once I have preliminary results from my study to ensure your perspective is represented?

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Leveling the Playing Field: Fostering Student Success in the PRSSA Bateman Case Study Competition

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study provides the first known scholarly research specifically about the PRSSA Bateman Case Study Competition. Through triangulation of data from a survey, focus groups, and public data analysis, the authors explored the benefits and challenges of Bateman as an experiential learning program in public relations education. While promoted by the PRSSA organization as “the premier national case study competition for public relations students” (PRSSA, n.d.), research insights indicate that Bateman falls short in meeting students’ educational needs, which is reflected in a 41.7% decrease in competition entries since 2018. Study findings provide support for several research-based recommendations to improve competition practices related to the competition timeline, experiential learning outcomes, organizational communication, judging practices, and support for diversity, equity, and inclusion of Bateman student teams.

Keywords: PRSSA, Bateman Case Study Competition, DE&I, experiential learning, CPRE, PRSA, student competitions

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The Public Relations Student Society of America's (PRSSA) Bateman Case Study Competition (Bateman) offers experiential learning activity by way of a national competition open to student teams composed of PRSSA members from a single university. Founded in 1973, the competition began as a single-day activity that challenged students to brainstorm a solution to a public relations problem (Teahan et al., 2008). Today, Bateman has grown to a multi-month competition where student teams create localized campaigns for a national "client" that takes students through the process of research, planning, implementation, and evaluation of a public relations campaign. To complete their entries, student teams submit a case study that documents their campaign process and outcomes. Judging results are completed by the end of April to select three finalists and a varying number of honorable mention teams. Bateman offers significant incentives to the three finalist teams including travel for teams to present their cases in person to a judging panel to determine ranking, a trophy and $3,500 for first place, plaque and $2,500 for second place, and plaque and $1,500 for third place.

As Bateman combines both the implementation portion of a campaign and a competition, it is unique among experiential learning opportunities. The competition usually, but does not always, partners with a non-profit client, which offers direct ties to career non-profit experience. Lastly, as the competition is judged by public relations professionals in the industry, Bateman demonstrates real outcomes like those completing a campaign in a professional setting would see. Other strategic communication student competitions such as the American Advertising Federation's National Student Advertising Competition (AAF, n.d.), Enactus World Cup (Enactus, n.d.), and HubSpot Level Up (HubSpot, n.d.) are pitched with proposed campaigns or simulations. Bateman, on the other hand, takes experiential learning a step further by adding local campaign implementation and submission of a case study that documents the campaign process and tangible outcomes.

While PRSSA Headquarters indicates that "more than 75 teams enter the competition each year…" (PRSSA, n.d.a), entries have not met that level since 2018 and have consistently trended downward. The number of competing teams decreased 41.7% from the 84 entries in 2018 to 49 in 2023 (PRSSA, n.d.b; PRSSA, n.d.c; PRSSA, n.d.d; PRSSA, n.d.e; PRSSA, n.d.f; PRSSA, n.d.g), which coincides with 44.8% decrease in overall PRSSA membership from 10,348 in 2018 to 5,772 in 2023 (PRSSA, 2018; PRSA, 2023a). Those figures might indicate that Bateman is not meeting the evolving needs of public relations education and/or support for a positive and successful experience for students who participate in the competition.

Little has been documented regarding how universities decide to compete in Bateman or how the competition supports experiential learning of students. Some universities integrate Bateman in a course, some use it as a student agency project, and others use it as an extracurricular activity. The purpose of this mixed-methods study—comprised of a questionnaire, focus groups, and public data analysis—is to explore the benefits and challenges of Bateman in the context of the Commission on Public Relations' (CPRE, 2018; CPRE, 2023) curriculum research and recommendations, common practices of Bateman finalist and honorable mention teams, and how the competition supports diversity, equity, and inclusion in competition practices. Study findings provide support for research-based recommendations to enhance competition practices to better meet the current needs of public relations education.

Literature Review

Public Relations Curricula Objectives

There is no shortage of published research that assesses the advertising and public relations curricula and its ability to address the ever-changing needs of the industry (Anwer & Kwong, 2022; Auger &

Cho, 2016; Brunner et al., 2018; CPRE, 2018; CPRE, 2006; Coombs & Rybacki, 1999; DiStaso et al., 2009; Johnson & Ross, 2001; Kim et al., 2021; Neff et al., 1999; Neill & Shauster, 2015; Stacks et al., 1999; Todd & Hudson, 2009). To best understand the ongoing discussion of core skills taught in public relations, one must first begin with program accreditation and certification standards. Accreditation for advertising and public relations is primarily granted by two institutions, a) the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (ACEJMC), and b) the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which offers Certification in Education in Public Relations (CEPR).

While accreditation from ACEJMC may apply to advertising and public relations programs that are housed in larger journalism and mass communication departments or schools, the accreditation process does not specifically address the standards of quality that may be unique to advertising and public relations education. The Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) specifically addresses quality standards in public relations education, including six specific courses that were identified as "ideal" for an undergraduate public relations program in its report, "Fast Forward: Foundations + Future State. Educators + Practitioners" (CPRE, 2018). The six courses are: a) Introduction or Principles, b) Research, c) Writing, d) Campaigns and Case Studies, e) Supervised Work Experience and Internships, and f) Ethics.

CPRE's mission is to be "the authoritative voice on public relations education," and provides "recommendations on public relations education for universities and professional associations across the globe" (CPRE, n.d.). Learning objectives are commonly mapped from top attributes of knowledge, skills, abilities to assess the connections and gaps between PR curricula and professional practice. Educators need clearly articulated learning outcomes that prepare students for entry-level careers in public relations (Brunner et al., 2018). Due to the increased scrutiny and focus on assessment in academia, tangible learning outcomes are also important for program assessment by universities (Bajkiewicz & Nash, 2023), and accrediting/certification bodies (ACEJMC, n.d.; PRSA, 2023b). An issue that continues to arise in public relations education is "the difference between what educators believe they are teaching and what practitioners believe they will find in new hires" (CPRE, 2023, p. 47). This is where experiential learning programs like the Bateman Case Study Competition are extremely valuable (Maben & Whitson, 2013).

RQ1: How does the PRSSA Bateman Case Study Competition support public relations curricula?

Experiential Learning as Pedagogical Practice

The benefits of experiential learning as a pedagogical practice have been widely studied and are such a critical component of some college majors that they are infused into the requirements, such as nursing clinicals or student teaching. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory has served as a framework for studies encompassing a wide variety of higher education programs. As Clark et al. (2010) noted from a U.S. Department of Education report, experiential learning "is a broad term generally used to describe a series of pragmatic activities sequenced in such a way that it is thought to enhance the educational experience for the student learner" (p. 46), and the focus of experiential learning is an application of theory into an "encounter with a learning environment" that requires active student engagement (p. 48). This opportunity is distinct from the more passive teacher-led classroom experience (Clark et al., 2010; Stutts & West, 2005).

In public relations education, experiential learning has been widely adapted for aspects of the public relations curriculum, such as digital (McCollough, et al., 2021; Ewing et al., 2018) and social media management (Fraustino et al., 2015; Garcia & Brooks, 2022; Kinsky et al., 2014), writing (Meganck & Smith, 2019; Childers & Levenshus,

2016) and strategic campaigns (Aldoory & Wrigley, 1999; Benigni et al., 2004; Weed, 2018). As Weed (2018) noted, key business skills relevant to public relations professionals were evident through experiential learning in ways that directly benefited students' transition into the workplace. Public relations, as a discipline, benefits from pre-professional experience and the application of classroom concepts (Andrews, 2007; Jackson, 2015).

Student Perceptions of Experiential Learning

Research about student perceptions of strategic communication experiential learning has overwhelmingly shown that students see value in the opportunity (Aldoory & Wrigley, 1999), and feel that they learn much more in competitions versus in-class projects (Kim et al., 2021; Stutts & West, 2005). In the student-run agency, students report satisfaction with the experiential learning opportunities that use real clients to hone professional skills and open career opportunities (Begini et al., 2004; Bush, 2009; Ranta et al., 2021). A common experiential learning model is service learning, where PR students work with a non-profit on a campaign, often in groups to facilitate better group dynamic engagement (Pope-Ruark et al., 2014). Service learning also allows for more student autonomy and creativity than traditional class-based projects (Werder & Strand, 2011), and fosters ethical professional practice (Place, 2018).

RQ2: What are common management practices of PRSSA Bateman Case Study Competition teams?

Addressing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Experiential Learning

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a broad term that encompasses many common characteristics of individuals or groups including race, ethnicity, gender, and orientation (Place & Vanc, 2016), but also includes other less transparent constructs such as economic security and access to needed resources. Underrepresented students encounter various obstacles, including a low sense of belonging, stress, and less access to resources, which can lead to an academic journey often marked by struggles with cognitive skills, socio-emotional challenges, and identity development (Tsai et al., 2022). Previous research found that PR educators should create inclusive environments (Tsai et al., 2022) and promote diverse mentorship opportunities (Brown et al., 2019). effectiveness of campaign research, implementation, and evaluation. Success in diversity and inclusion initiatives hinges on the commitment, responsibility, and accountability of leadership to drive the necessary structural and cultural transformations (Bardhan & Gower, 2022).

To construct a comprehensive framework for enhancing DEI in a PR classroom, Meganck and Kim (2022) found variability in the implementation of DEI-focused structural elements (e.g., value statements, course objectives, textbook selection, assignments, course evaluation). High levels of practice were observed in creating inclusive learning environments and in fostering intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. However, areas like curriculum transformation and professional development for DEI need further improvement in this area. Anwer and Kwong (2022) take it one step further and move DEI out of the classroom and into PRSSA to showcase that extracurricular activities “can be a space for learning and teaching public relations at the intersections of leadership, mentorship, and DEI” (p. 161).

On a larger scale, DEI is an important issue that should be recognized between related organizations such as different universities competing in a student competition. Comparisons of social class can manifest in perceptions of imposter syndrome (Waymer, 2012), which is relevant to open student competitions where entries are judged in one pool, regardless of specific advantages or biases that might exist due to university prestige, size, or resources (Brutus & Bothello, 2021). Bothner et al. (2011) argued that the benefits of case competitions can be improved when investments are made in non-elite participants. One way to increase this type of investment is by integrating case competition participation into a capstone class design (Lebrón et al., 2020).

RQ3: Does the PRSSA Bateman Case Study Competition support diversity, equity, and inclusion of competition teams?

Method

This mixed-method study consisted of (a) an online questionnaire distributed to Bateman faculty and professional advisers, (b) a series of five one-hour focus groups with advisers, and (c) a content analysis of Bateman information publicly available on the PRSSA Headquarters and university websites. The use of multiple research methods provides three data sources to compare and contrast the benefits and challenges of Bateman competition experience from different perspectives. The questionnaire provided broad insights into numerous aspects of the Bateman competition. The focus groups allowed advisers to delve more deeply into qualitative assessment of their, and students,' competition experience. Public information from PRSSA Headquarters and universities provided a complete and accurate scope of competition outcomes and common qualities of competition teams that would not be captured in voluntary participation of either the study questionnaire or focus groups.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics software and distributed via three rounds of individual emails to identified Bateman faculty and professional advisers during the 2017 through 2020 competition years. Questionnaire protocols were approved by the respective institutional review boards of the authors. The questionnaire included 80 items that measured five categories of information: (a) demographic information about advisers and universities of Bateman teams, (b) Bateman faculty adviser expectations and duties, c) management of Bateman teams, (d) perceptions about how Bateman aligns with public relations curriculum learning objectives, and (e) general perceptions of the competition. Qualifying questions at the beginning of the questionnaire confirmed participants' consent to participate, that they were at least 18 years of age, and that they were a Bateman adviser at any point between 2017 and 2020. No identifying information was collected as part of the survey, though respondents could opt-in for a $50 Amazon gift card drawing through a separate link using their employer email addresses.

Demographic Information

This section consisted of 15 questions to collect data about: (a) demographic information about advisers and universities, (b) accreditation status of advisers and universities, and (c) general PRSSA chapter information (as Bateman is a PRSSA-affiliated event).

Bateman Faculty Adviser Information

Eight questions covered topics such as (a) the appointment process for Bateman faculty advisers, (b) faculty status, (c) general information about Bateman faculty advising duties, and d) compensation for Bateman faculty advising.

Management of Bateman Teams

This section consisted of 23 multiple-choice questions that covered topics related to the day-to-day management of Bateman teams during the competition timeline. Question topics included (a) recruitment practices for Bateman teams, (b) the impact of university academic calendars on participation in Bateman, (c) time commitment of students and advisers throughout the competition timeline, and (d) student compensation for participation in the Bateman, (e) departmental support for Bateman teams, and f) placement of Bateman teams as a finalist or honorable mention.

Perceptions of Alignment between the Bateman Case Study Competition Alignment and PR Curricula

Participants answered three multiple-choice questions that assessed their perception of how well Bateman aligned with results of CPRE's Fast Forward (2018) report about the state of public relations education. Participants stated their level of agreement on how well the competition integrated: (a) 12 areas of public relations knowledge, (b) 13 unique skills, and (c) five abilities that were identified in the Fast Forward report (see Appendix A).

General Perceptions of the Bateman Case Study Competition

Fifteen Likert-scale and 10 open-ended questions gained further insights about the respondent's perception of Bateman including: (a) rules and regulations, (b) competition judging, (c) student and adviser challenges and opportunities of competing.

Focus Groups

Five focus groups were conducted via Zoom, and were composed of five to eight participants who identified as a Bateman faculty or professional adviser in the past year. Care was taken to ensure diversity within each focus group between adviser role, length of service as an adviser, university size, and award-winning status of their Bateman team(s). Each focus group lasted one hour and consisted of six questions about Bateman including: (a) student benefits, (b) student challenges, (c) alignment with PR curriculum objectives, (d) general reputation, (e) fairness and equity, and (f) improvement recommendations.

Content Analysis

Information about Bateman competition teams was gathered from a public information search on the PRSSA HQ website, websites of universities with Bateman teams, and the Carnegie Classification website. A content analysis was conducted for the past decade of the competition from 2014 through 2023. Items included from the PRSSA HQ website in the content analysis were (a) Bateman client, (b) quantity of entries, (c) finalist and honorable mention teams, and (d) project brief release date (PRSSA, n.d.). On university websites, the webpages of Bateman home departments and university class schedules were searched to determine if class credit (classes, independent studies, practicums) was provided for student participation in the competition. The Carnegie Classifications website provided information about the public/private status of the institution (American Council on Education, n.d.).

Participant Recruitment

Questionnaire

The authors identified Bateman Case Study Competition faculty and professional advisers through an information request to PRSSA Headquarters. The authors requested the names of faculty and professional advisers from the most recent five years, which was included with each Bateman Competition team's intent-to-enter form as submitted at the beginning of the competition timeline. While the PRSSA Headquarters office complied with the information request, only adviser information from 2017 through 2020 was provided to the authors.

In total, 292 teams from 91 universities competed in Bateman from 2017 through 2020. From the information provided by the PRSSA Headquarters office, the names of 123 faculty advisers and 106 professional advisers were identified. The authors proceeded with an email contact search through the PRSA member directory, university websites, and general searches through Google.

Contact email information was found for all 123 faculty advisers identified in the Bateman intent-to-enter form. Four emails were returned as undeliverable and two people responded to say they were not a Bateman faculty adviser, bringing the total sample of faculty advisers to 117. Of the 106 professional advisers identified in the Bateman intent-to-enter form, email addresses could not be found for 15 advisers, nine emails were returned as undeliverable, and seven people responded to say they were not a Bateman professional adviser, bringing the total sample population to 75.

Three rounds of individualized study invitation emails were sent over four weeks to the faculty and professional advisers. Study participants had the opportunity to voluntarily enter a drawing for a $50

Amazon e-gift card at the end of the survey, with one winner selected for every 10 participants.

Focus Groups

Focus group recruitment occurred in Fall 2021. The authors used the same contact list of Bateman advisers, but asked recipients to share the name of a new adviser if applicable. Invitation emails asked interested participants to complete a short informational survey that included the participant's (a) name, (b) Bateman adviser role, (c) time served as an adviser, (d) how many times they had advised a Bateman team that earned honorable mention or finalist placement, (e) university size, and (f) time availability.

Three rounds of individualized study invitation emails were sent over two weeks to the faculty and professional advisers. All focus group participants received a $10 Amazon e-gift card.

Participant Demographics

Questionnaire

Seventy-nine advisers completed the questionnaire, for an overall response rate of 41.1%, which was further broken down by faculty advisers at a 46.2% response rate (n = 54), professional advisers at a 22.7% response rate (n = 17), and eight respondents who served as both faculty and professional adviser during the 2017 through 2020 Bateman competition years. One participant did not respond.

The majority of the study population identified as female at 76.0% (n = 60), 22.8% (n = 18) identified as male. Of the respondents who indicated the years of work experience they held in the public relations industry (n = 77), 62.3% (n = 48) held 10 or more years of PR work experience, followed by four-to-nine years at 19.5% (n = 15), and three years or less at 18.2% (n = 14). Among respondents who held Accreditation in Public Relations (n =26), a PRSA-affiliated professional certification, 16 were faculty advisers, six were professional advisers, and four had acted as both faculty and professional advisers in the 2017 through 2020 study timeline.

Among faculty adviser respondents, including those who served as both faculty and professional advisers during the 2017 through 2020 timeline (*n* = 61), 50.0% (*n* = 31) identified as tenure-track faculty including 16 assistant professors, 11 associate professors, and four full professors. Non-tenure track faculty comprised the other 46.8% (*n* = 29), including 24 full-time, one part-time, and four who did not indicate full-time or part-time status. The remaining two participants identified as graduate student instructors. Participants who had been faculty for seven or more years comprised 45.2% (*n* =28), followed by those who had been faculty for four-to-six years at 29.0% (*n* = 18), and those who had been faculty for three or less years at 24.2% (*n* = 15). In regard to teaching load, 72.1% taught three (*n* = 22) or four (*n* = 22) classes per term, 23.0% taught one (*n* = 4) or two (*n* = 10) classes, and 4.8% (*n* = 3) taught five or more classes. In addition to Bateman advising, 75.0% of respondents either served as faculty (*n* = 42) or professional (*n* = 1) adviser for their university PRSSA chapter.

Focus Groups

Twenty-nine focus group participants were comprised of 24 faculty advisers, three professional advisers, and two participants who had served as both faculty and professional adviser in different years of the competition. Two participants were also identified as Bateman judges in addition to being an adviser. Four participants had been an adviser for less than one year, 14 for one to three years, four for four to six years, three for seven to nine years, and four for 10+ years. Thirteen participants came from universities with less than 10,000 students, 10 from universities with 10,000 - 39,999 students, and six from universities with 40,000+ students. Thirteen participants advised at least one Bateman team that had received an honorable mention or placed as a finalist from 2017 to 2020.

Results

Alignment with Public Relations Curricula Objectives

The study questionnaire explored how well Bateman aligned with curricular learning objectives identified in CPRE's (2018) Fast Forward report. Seventy-one faculty and professional adviser respondents rate how important, from 1 = not important to 5 = extremely important, that students participating in Bateman use 12 knowledge areas, 13 skills, and five abilities that CPRE identified as important for entry-level PR practitioners to possess.

Knowledge

Advisers rated the CPRE knowledge areas of ethics ($M = 4.10$, $SD = .95$), followed by management ($M = 4.06$, $SD = .85$), cultural perspective ($M = 4.04$, $SD = .86$), social issues ($M = 4.03$, $SD = .82$), diversity & inclusion ($M = 4.03$, $SD = .95$), and business acumen ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .89$) as more important for students participating in Bateman. Lower ratings of importance were found for PR laws and regulation ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 1.07$), internal or employee communication ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.13$), global perspectives ($M = 3.21$, $SD = .99$), crisis management ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 1.20$), and PR history ($M = 2.16$, $SD = .94$). A one-way ANOVA found no significant differences between adviser type and level of agreement for any of the 12 knowledge areas.

Skills

Advisers rated some applied skills as important for students participating in Bateman. Writing received the strongest level of agreement ($M = 4.81$, $SD = .46$), followed by communication ($M = 4.76$, $SD = .464$), research & analytics ($M = 4.54$, SD = .58), editing ($M = 4.44$, $SD = .77$), social media management ($M = 4.44$, $SD = .63$), storytelling ($M = 4.30$, $SD = .77$), and media relations ($M = 4.07$, $SD = .748$). Lesser ratings found for graphic design ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .86$), public speaking ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .981$), ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .893$), website development

(M = 3.37, SD = .904), speechwriting (M = 2.74, SD = 1.01), and app development (M = 2.11, SD = .826). A one-way ANOVA found significant differences between adviser type and rating for graphic design [F(2,66) = 3.984, p = .003], audio/video production [F(2,67) = 2.459, p = .043], and website development [F(2,67) = 3.244, p = .013), with faculty advisers rating those skills as more important.

Abilities

Overall, the advisers highly rated strategic planning (M = 4.76, SD = .43), problem solving (M = 4.73, SD = .51), critical thinking (M = 4.71, SD = .54), creative thinking (M = 4.70, SD = .46), and analytical thinking (M = 4.61, SD = .55) as important for students competing in Bateman. A one-way ANOVA found no significant differences between adviser type and level of agreement for any of the five abilities.

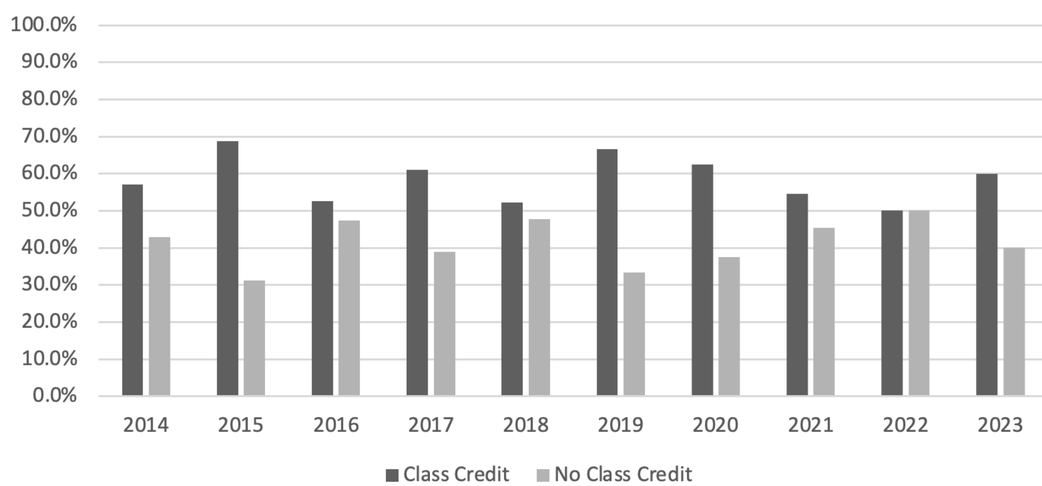
Management Practices of Bateman Teams

The first management practice of Bateman teams was student recruitment. While the majority of questionnaire respondents indicated that they recruited Bateman teams from within PR majors at 66.7% (n = 36), 29.6% (n = 16) indicated that they recruited from outside their PR student population, and 3.7% (n = 2) did not know from which student groups they recruited. A one-way ANOVA found a significant difference in whether Bateman teams were recruited from outside PR students based on how long the university had participated in the competition [F(6,38) = 2.513, p = .038], with universities that had participated in Bateman for eight or more years being less likely to recruit outside of PR students. Further tests of one-way ANOVAs found no significant difference in recruiting teams outside of PR students along the variables of how long the respondent had been a Bateman adviser or the size of the university. Recruitment was also noted as a challenge by 37.9% (n = 11) of focus group participants.

The majority of advisers indicated the students receive some type of course credit at 81.5% (*n* = 54), whether it be a specific Bateman class (*n* = 14), as a section option for an existing course such as campaigns or a capstone (*n* = 18), an independent study (*n* = 11), or as multi-course series (*n* = 1). Nearly 13% (*n* = 7) of respondents indicated their students did not receive course credit, participated as part of an extracurricular student-run agency (*n* = 1), or did not know if students received credit (*n* = 2). Of respondents who indicated how many credit hours students received to compete in Bateman (*n* = 46), 70.0% (n = 32) noted students received one-to-three credit hours, followed by four-to-six hours at 24.0% (*n* = 11), and no credit hours at 6.5% (*n* = 3). That data was supported by a public information analysis of university websites and course catalogs for Bateman finalists and honorable teams that found through the past decade, 73.3% (*n* = 22) of finalists and 55.8% (*n* = 76) of honorable mention teams received some form of class credit (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

2014-2023 Bateman Finalists & Honorable Mention Teams that Receive Class Credit



Time Commitment

Faculty respondents were asked to indicate the average amount of time they committed to Bateman advising duties throughout the individual months of the competition along the scale of: (a) none, (b) one-to-three hours, (c) four-to-six hours, (d) seven-to-nine hours, and (e) 10+ hours. The majority of respondents spent one-to-three hours per week on Bateman tasks during the months of October (n = 29), November (n = 29), December (n = 32), and April (n = 21). The greatest number of respondents increased their time commitment to between four and six hours per week in the months of January (n = 18), February (n = 19), and March (n = 14), though many other advisers increased their time commitment to seven hours or more per week in January (n = 7), February (n = 13), and March (n = 17). A one-way ANOVA found no significant differences between how Bateman faculty advisers were compensated and their time commitment through the individual months of the competition timeline.

The majority of survey respondents indicated their Bateman teams spent one-to-three hours per week on competition tasks in October at 55.1% (n = 27), November at 53.0% (n = 26), and December at 67.4% (n = 33). Time commitment increased for the majority of respondents to four-to-six for the month of January at 46.9% (n = 23) and April at 35.4% (n = 17), and seven hours or more for the months of February at 63.2% (n = 31) and March at 73.5% (n = 36). Significant positive correlations between the number of credit hours students received and the number of hours committed to Bateman tasks were found throughout the competition timeline (see Table 1).

Table 1

Correlation of Credit Hours and Hours Committed Per Month to Bateman Tasks

		Average Hours Per Week Spent on Bateman Tasks - October	Average Hours Per Week Spent on Bateman Tasks - November	Average Hours Per Week Spent on Bateman Tasks - December	Average Hours Per Week Spent on Bateman Tasks - January	Average Hours Per Week Spent on Bateman Tasks - February	Average Hours Per Week Spent on Bateman Tasks - March	Average Hours Per Week Spent on Bateman Tasks - April
How many credit hours do students receive for participating in the Bateman Case Study Competition?	Pearson Correlation	.639**	.578**	.454**	.412**	.454**	.500**	.309*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.002	.004	.002	.000	.038
	N	46	46	46	46	46	46	46

** p < .001
* p < .05

Further tests of one-way ANOVAs found significant differences between a Bateman team's placement as a finalist and the number of hours committed to Bateman tasks in the months of January [$F(2,50) = 3.550$, $p = .036$], February [$F(2,50) = 3.748$, $p = .030$), March [$F(2,50) = 4.229$, $p = .020$). Finalist teams spent averaged four to six hours per week on competition tasks, while non-finalists averaged one to three hours per week. No significant difference was found between the amount of time Bateman teams committed to competition tasks and receiving an honorable mention acknowledgment.

Time commitment for students was also an area of concern among 25.6% ($n = 8$) focus group participants. One focus group participant summed up the challenge many were facing with competing priorities,

> Our challenge has been that it's not, at my university, built into a classroom structure at all, so our team is always just a group of

> volunteers, students who take this on outside of any other class work or any other PRSSA involvement or internships… this is just one more thing on their plate.

Survey respondents also agreed that students should receive course credit for their work in the competition (*M* = 4.48, *SD* =.94). A one-way ANOVA found no significant difference between faculty and professional advisers in their level of agreement with the statement. A seasoned Bateman adviser noted,

> I would say it's very, very difficult to be competitive in Bateman without that classroom structure, credit and without a dedicated faculty member who's doing that as part of their teaching. I'm sure it's possible. It's a very, very difficult thing given the volume of resources and time that faculty need to put in for it to be successful.

Supporting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion of Bateman Teams

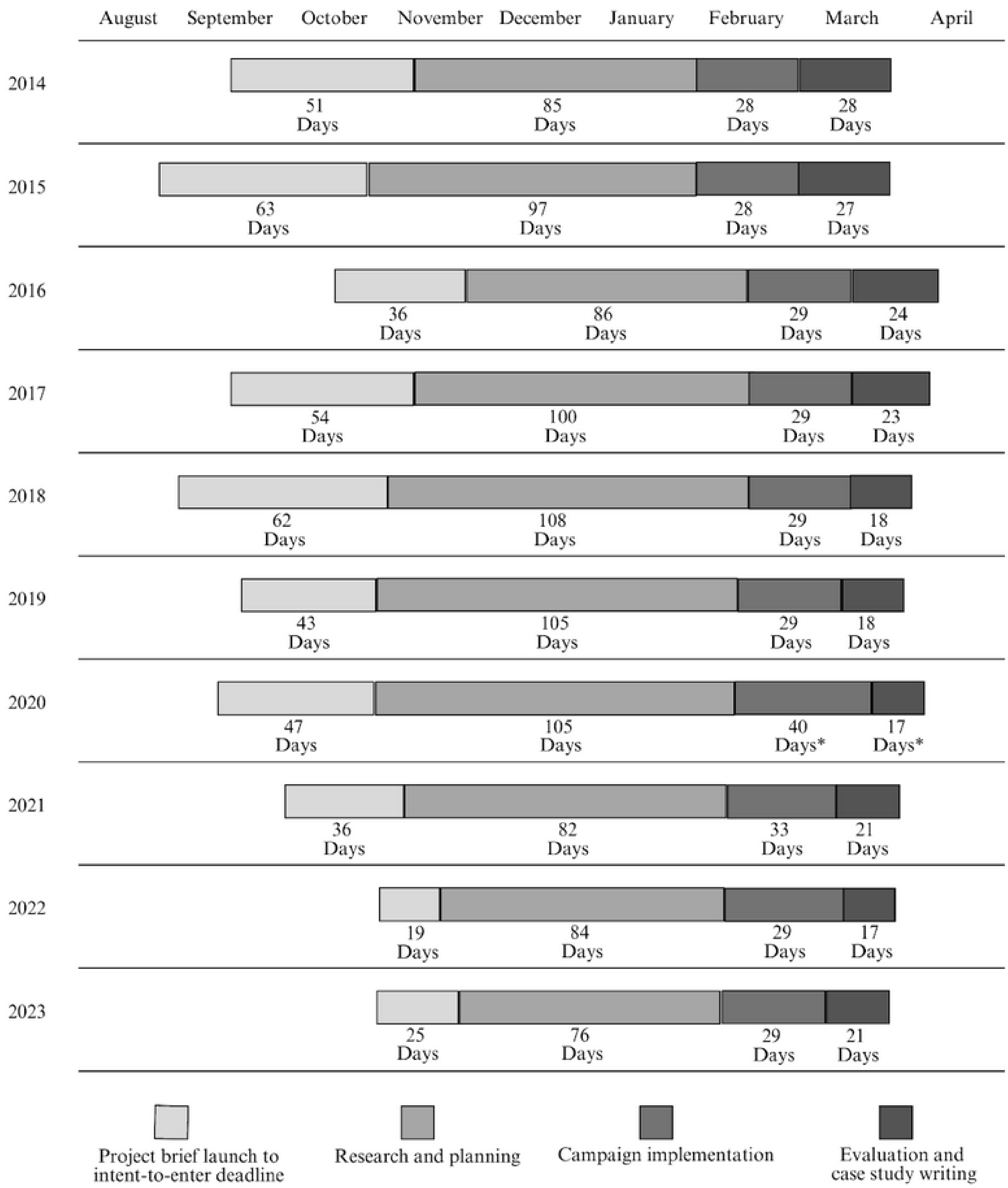
Competition Timeline

Among faculty and professional adviser survey respondents (*n* = 72), 62.5% (*n* = 45) disagreed that the timeline of Bateman worked with students' schedules, and 52.2% (*n* = 37) disagreed that the competition timeline worked with their own schedule. The competition timeline emerged as the most prominent concern of focus group participants, with it mentioned in the context of challenges from 65.5% (*n* = 19) of advisers, diminishing the reputation of the competition from 44.8% (*n* = 13), fairness of competition practices by 13.9% (*n* = 4), and an area for improvement by 51.7% (*n* = 15). As a faculty adviser stated, "Structurally, Bateman is not compatible with my program. The timing just does not work and we, as a department, cannot find a home credits-wise for it." Additional advisers noted the timeline is compatible with university research regulations, with one advisor who shared, "I'll start with the beginning of the timeline in terms of, you know, the research phase, and we run into issues that conflict our IRB application deadlines, so when the information is released, it's too late."

An analysis of the Bateman timeline documentation of the PRSSA HQ website found little standardization in terms of project brief launch, intent-to-enter deadlines, length of research and planning timelines, campaign implementation, or length of time to complete case study writing. The total length of time of Bateman, from project brief launch to the case study submission deadline, has decreased from 217 days in 2018 to 150 days in 2023. The reduction in the Bateman timeline can be linked to continually later project brief launch dates, which usually occurred in September but have moved to the end of October in recent years. With the later Bateman project brief launch dates, there has been as little as 19 days for teams to decide whether to compete and a reduction of campaign and planning from more than 100 to 76 days (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

2014-2023 Bateman Competition Timeline



* Timeline extended one week due to COVID-19 U.S. shelter-in-place policy

University spring breaks also posed a challenge in the competition timeline. Nearly 90.0% of respondents indicated that university spring break occurred in March, with the greatest number of respondents indicating that spring break fell during the second week of March at 42.3% (*n* = 22), followed by the third week at 25.0% (*n* = 13), first week at 15.4% (*n* = 8), and fourth week at 5.8% (*n* = 3). The remaining 11.5% of respondents indicated their university spring break fell outside the month of March. The majority of faculty adviser survey respondents indicated their university spring break always overlapped with campaign implementation at 56.6% (*n* = 30) or sometimes overlapped at 35.6% (*n* =19). Only 7.6% (*n* = 4) indicated that their university spring break never overlapped with Bateman campaign implementation. The format of a semester or quarter term had no effect on responses. Bateman teams whose spring breaks overlapped with the campaign timeline addressed the issue in various ways including some active campaign work during the break at 37.0% (*n* = 17), followed by pre-scheduling content at 30.4% (*n* = 14), treating spring break like any other week of the campaign at 17.4% (*n* = 8), and no work for the campaign during spring break at 15.2% (*n* = 7).

Access to Resources

Faculty adviser survey respondents (*n* = 53) indicated what types of departmental or university resources students received to compete in Bateman. Respondents most frequently indicated teams received access to event space reservations at 73.6% (*n* = 39), followed by access to specialized software such as Adobe Creative Suite, SPSS, or social media monitoring at 50.9% (*n* = 27), financial funding at 49.1% (*n* = 26), printing services at 39.6% (*n* = 21), office supplies at 35.8% (*n* = 19), and dedicated workspace such as a Bateman office at 18.9% (*n* = 10). In addition, 41.5% (*n* = 22) of respondents indicated teams received assistance from faculty who were not a Bateman adviser.

A one-way ANOVA found a significant difference between university size and access to a dedicated workspace [$F(6,47) = 2.594$, $p = .032$], with Bateman teams from universities with more than 50,000 students being most likely to receive dedicated workspace. Further statistical tests determined no significant difference between access to specific resources when compared to university size, whether Bateman students received course credit, or placement of teams as a finalist or honorable mention in the competition from 2017 through 2020.

Competition Management Practices

Faculty and professional adviser survey respondents ($n = 71$) indicated that certain Bateman competition management practices no longer serve their needs or the needs of student participants. Respondents at least somewhat agreed with the statement that students should receive a competition orientation from the PRSSA HQ office ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.00$), which was supported by a comment from a faculty adviser, "Knowing details about the client and having the case brief when classes begin in the fall would be ideal for recruiting."

Responses from focus group participants also indicate issues with communication, with 27.5% ($n = 8$) identifying that as an area for improvement, with a focus group participant noting,

> Communicate, please tell us what's going on. The students are upset over the lack of a client, they're upset over the lack of communications from National, and they have complained repeatedly, and I don't blame them. Even if you have to call and say we don't have anything, at least tell us, but the lack of information posted on the website, and the lack of communication, along with a late client announcement has been just a persistent problem. We were actually working on a replacement client until they came out with one.

Another participant added, "Get the client announcement and brief out by no later than mid-July. Bateman advisers need some lead time." A third participant shared,

> This year has just been a nightmare. This is my first year teaching it and being a faculty advisor. I've been a professional advisor before. I've been a judge, I've been a participant as a student, so I played all the roles with Bateman. Just from talking with colleagues and students, the reputation, word of mouth—granted this is all in my small- my small circle—is almost split. Students look at it one way, faculty look at the other, but over the last few years it's taken a hit with delayed announcements and the quality of the clients, especially this year.

Survey respondents most strongly disagreed with the statement that student teams should pay an intent-to-enter fee to compete in Bateman (*M* = 2.00, *SD* = 1.17), which was also reflected in a focus group respondent's insight about financial commitments to participate,

> I'm in a public university that has a variety of different types of students. It has first generation students. It has students who work sometimes two jobs to attend college…so some students, no big deal, but other students, you know, they don't have a car, and so there is some equity issues for a poor college student trying to act like a PR professional…I think it's worth thinking about that, you know, every school is different. That some students are socio-economically disadvantaged and that there might be an equity issue deeply embedded in the Bateman Competition.

Additional disagreements were found with statements that there is a level playing for all teams that compete in Bateman (*M* = 2.21, *SD* = 1.12), that the timeline of Bateman aligns with students' schedules (*M* = 2.42, *SD* = 1.22) or advisers' schedules (*M* = 2.72, *SD* = 1.26), and that there is no conflict-of-interest in having a PRSA organization as a client (*M* = 2.28, *SD* = 1.33). A one-way ANOVA found that faculty advisers (including those who also served as professional adviser between 2017 and 2020) expressed more disagreement that the Bateman timeline did not work with students' schedules [$F(2,70) = 4.792$, $p = .011$], their own schedule [$F(2,70) = 6.229$, $p = .003$], and there was no conflict-of-interest in having a PRSA organization as a client [$F(2,70) = 3.306$, $p = .043$]. A focus group participant stated that,

> Our university has decided that it won't participate when PRSSA or PRSA is the client because we find that paying money to do PR for the organization problematic. It's a weird lesson to teach students that they have to pay PRSA/PRSSA to do PR for PRSA/PRSSA.

Overall, survey respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with statements that Bateman campaign objectives were clear ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.20$) and remained consistent throughout the competition timeline ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.26$). a significant difference was found between faculty and professional advisers, with faculty advisers expressing more disagreement with statements related to clarity [$F(2,70) = 5.227$, $p = .008$) and consistency [$F(2,70) = 5.994$, $p = .004$) of Bateman campaign objectives. Respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that Bateman campaign objectives were specific ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.39$), measurable ($M = 3.42$, $SD =1.43$), achievable ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.40$), realistic ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.38$), or time-bound ($M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.26$). As a faculty adviser shared in an open-ended survey response, "having more professional PR experience or oversight of the clients and having advisors be part of drafting the brief would go a long way toward improving the experience for students." Another added that "improved client communication and clearer articulation of the campaign goals/objectives—especially relative to what we teach as campaign best practices—would help."

Bateman Competition Judging

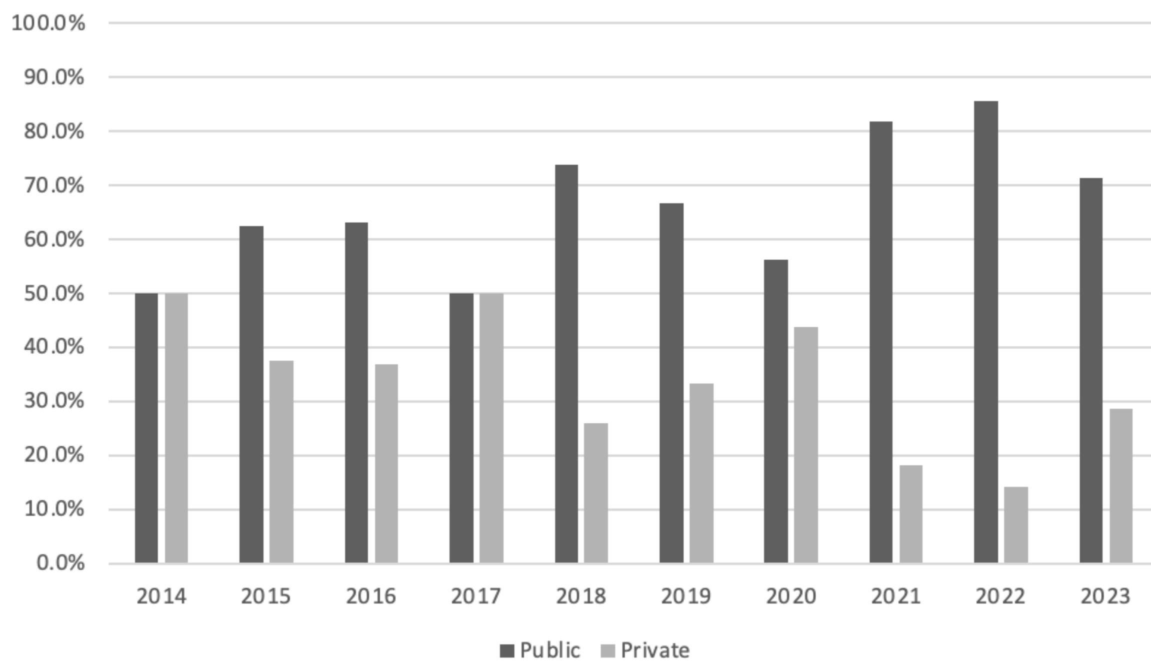
Faculty and professional adviser respondents (n = 70) indicated their level of agreement with four statements related to the judging process of Bateman. Respondents agreed that the judging rubric for the competition should be included in the project brief (M = 4.66, SD = .653). A one-way ANOVA found no difference in the level of agreement between faculty and professional advisers. Respondents disagreed with statements that the judging process of Bateman was fair to all teams (M = 2.65, SD = 1.14) and that no bias existed in the judging (M = 2.58, SD = 1.22). A one-way ANOVA found a significant difference between faculty advisers and professional advisers (including those who had also served as faculty advisers during the 2017 through 2020 competition years) and their level of agreement that there is no bias judging [$F(2,70) = 3.807$, $p = .027$), with faculty advisers expressing greater disagreement with the statement. A focus group participant expanded on the issue of judging bias,

> One of the things that my students have looked at over the years is the list of the judges and the list of who wins, and the fact that the judges can be actually, it appears, maybe they have some way of doing this but it appears that the judges can be from a university and they can show favoritism towards a university because they know what school it is… Our students looked at it one time and said they actually went and did some research and saw how many people from a particular university were there in a year that particular university won. It looked unfair because there were so many people that were affiliated in some way shape or form with that university.

A review of Bateman finalist and honorable mention teams from 2014 through 2023 (see Appendix B) was conducted to determine how frequently universities placed in the competition. The analysis found that only 13 universities were awarded top three placements in the past 10 years, and five of those universities placed as a finalist three or more times during that time span. Of 55 honorable mention teams recognized in the past decade, six universities received the distinction five or more times. Eighteen universities awarded as finalist or honorable mention since 2014 submitted case studies from multiple competition teams, and four of those universities won multiple awards in at least one competition year. An additional analysis found that 67.9% (*n* = 112) finalist and honorable mention teams came from public universities (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

2014-2023 Bateman Case Study Finalists & Honorable Mentions by University Type



Training for judges was noted as a supplemental issue by focus group participants. As a faculty adviser shared,

> The feedback after working for almost a year is always so disappointing. We usually just get the scores and maybe one or two sentences. As faculty, we have to give our students a lot more feedback on projects with much shorter timelines. Getting the minimal feedback after doing free PR work for a client feels like a

> slap in the face. It's not so much the content of that feedback, but the quality and amount of it that is so frustrating.

Another focus group respondent addressed the need for training in judging Bateman submissions,

> I'm a member of both PRSA and [IBAC], and this is something I think [IBAC] does much better than PRSA. When they have competitions and there are judges, they provide judges training. It's an online thing that you go through, self-paced, but they provide training for the judges on what to look for, how to give feedback in a constructive way, what kinds of things need feedback.

Survey respondents also agreed that Bateman should be blind judged in the first round to determine finalists and honorable mentions (M = 4.18, SD = 1.20), and that Bateman teams should be judged in groups based on university size (M = 3.59, SD = 1.43). Respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that Bateman teams should be judged in divisions based on university size (M = 3.59, SD = 1.43), though it was noted by 17.2% (n = 5) focus group participants as a way to improve the competition, as one participant shared,

> I think that could accomplish a couple of things aside from leveling the playing field, if you will, either by size of school or resources or market. You could also then open up more opportunities for recognition which I think is really key-accomplishes that regional thing but the national thing but just, you know, there are more winners, more students get to see that they were successful, which I think is very powerful for the program.

Discussion

This study provides the first academic research specifically about the PRSSA Bateman Case Study Competition. While promoted by the PRSSA organization as "the premier national case study competition for public relations students" (PRSSA, para. 1, n.d.a), insights from faculty and professional advisers indicate that Bateman falls short in meeting students' educational needs. Research results identified several recommendations for improvement related to the competition timeline, experiential learning outcomes, support for diversity, equity, and inclusion of Bateman teams, communication, and judging.

Study findings demonstrate that the Bateman experience integrates several knowledge areas, skills, and abilities identified by CPRE as important for entry-level public relations practitioners. That demonstrates the value of the competition experience as part of a learning curriculum, where advisers lead applied learning practices that directly benefit student success. Yet, the real questions lie in how to motivate students and advisers to participate in Bateman. What makes Bateman a more valuable experiential learning opportunity over other student competitions such as the National Student Advertising Competition, National Organ Donor Awareness Competition, CreateAthon, or university-based activities such as a service-learning class or student-run agency? As other options for experiential learning have emerged in public relations and strategic communication education, there is a greater need for Bateman organizers to demonstrate how the competition uniquely supports students' academic success and professional development.

Experiential Learning Objectives

As a student competition, the priority of Bateman must be to prioritize experiential learning that integrates knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that are emphasized by university PR curricula and education leadership organizations such as CPRE and accrediting/certification standards of ACEJMC and PRSA. While some skills were rated as highly important for students participating in the competition, there is a missed opportunity to clearly address how specific KSAs should be addressed as learning objectives in the Bateman campaign brief and other promotional materials. The alignment of curricular objectives to experiential learning outcomes of Bateman could be accomplished through the establishment of an advisory council or similar entity. The authors recommend an advisory council representing organizational thought leaders in public relations education to enhance the competition's value as an experiential learning program that supports student success and career readiness.

Supporting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion of Bateman Teams

Competition Timeline

As indicated in the results of both the questionnaire and focus groups, the October through April competition timeline does not work for students or advisers. As the majority of universities work within a semester system, a project brief launch in late October begins well after the beginning of the fall term and the case study submission date in April occurs before the end of the spring term. That hinders the ability of universities to integrate Bateman into existing classes, or to receive curriculum approval to add Bateman as a standalone class. In addition, the campaign implementation portion of the competition often overlaps with university spring breaks, which can negatively impact students' ability to launch and manage campaign tactics or put students in a position to continue campaign work even when classes are not in session. The authors recommend that Bateman organizers revise the competition timeline to work within a single academic term to ensure consistency and equity for participating teams (see Table 2).

Table 2

Recommended Timeline for Bateman to Align with Academic Calendar

First Monday of November	Client Announcement
First Monday of December	Project Brief posted online, and all documents sent via email.
Last Friday of January	Deadline to submit Intent-to-Enter form.
March 1 – April 15	Campaign Implementation (Team may choose four weeks).
May 1	Case Study deadline.

Compensation for Work

Bateman faculty advisers commit to a nine-month competition timeline with the majority committing one-to-three hours per week on competition tasks from October through December, and four-to-six hours per week from January through April. While the majority of faculty advisers received compensation for their work with Bateman teams, it is important to note that more than one-third of respondents received no compensation. Given the extensive time commitment that often exceeds the expectations of service, Bateman faculty advisers might run the risk of offsetting those hours by reducing their commitment to research or teaching, which is a common issue among PRSSA faculty advisers (Waymer, 2014; Weed et al., 2020).

The issue of time commitment also relates to students, as indicated by focus group participants, as some students are participating on a solely volunteer basis while others have dedicated hours to work on the campaign as a part of a dedicated class or independent study experience. That creates a scenario of inequity as Bateman students who receive course credit commit more time to competition tasks. On average, student teams spend one-to-three hours per week on competition tasks from October through December, and four-to six hours per week in January, and seven or more hours per week in February and March. At minimum, that is 72 hours a Bateman team commits to client tasks over the competition timeline. In terms of U.S. minimum wage, each Bateman team completes work worth at least $526.40 when calculated at the national minimum wage of $7.45 per hour (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). In addition, students (or universities) pay the intent-to-enter fee for each team and PRSSA membership costs. Research from the National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE) maintains that experiential learning activities are "vital in bridging the college experience to the world of work. Strengthening the availability of funding and protections for internships assures greater participant diversity, access, and opportunity, enhancing the overall quality and productivity of the workforce" (NACE, n.d. para. 14).

In the questionnaire, 87% of respondents indicated that their Bateman team received some form of course credit. In addition, the review of Bateman finalists and honorable mentions found that, overall, 42.4% came from universities that offer credit for Bateman credit but 73.3% of finalist teams receive credit. That makes sense in the context of dedicated hours per week students can commit to Bateman tasks, as well as a defined structure within to complete competition tasks under the guidance of faculty advisers who are also compensated for their participation. More efforts are needed from Bateman organizers to ensure that competition practices don't hinder its integration into a class model. The 41.7% drop in Bateman entries since 2018 indicates that something has emerged as a barrier to university participation in the competition, and the lack of compensation (in terms of class credit) for students and advisers could be a barrier to participate.

Financial Commitment

Bateman requires a financial commitment from participating teams, with an intent-to-enter fee (ranging from \$50 to \$65) whether or not a case study entry is submitted, plus the requirement that each team member be a member of PRSSA at the cost of \$55 for national dues. At the height of 84 Bateman entries in 2018, that brought in a minimum revenue of \$22,680 from the intent-to-enter fee for each team and PRSSA membership dues for a minimum of four students per team (PRSSA, 2018). Though PRSSA has waived the intent-to-enter fee since 2020, there has been no indication that is a permanent competition change. Even with the waiver of the intent-to-enter fee, the number of competing teams continued to decrease, to a 10-year low of 49 entries in 2023. Overall, advisers in both the survey and focus groups disagreed that there should be a Bateman intent-to-enter fee. With additional Bateman funding coming from a $35,000 competition sponsorship fee (PRSSA, 2023), the authors recommend the permanent elimination of the intent-to enter fee as a pay-to-play model that places a possible financial barrier to team participation.

Access to Resources

While access to resources did not significantly correlate with a Bateman team's ability to place as a finalist or honorable mention, it can give an implicit advantage to those teams that do receive departmental and university resources such as software and applications that enhance the effectiveness of campaign research, implementation, and evaluation. Bateman organizers should ensure that competition rules create a level playing field for student teams by creating comparable terms of access for resources or program partners that could provide resources for industry software or applications such as (a) Muck Rack or Cision for media relations, (b) SpyFu or Moz for SEO/SEM, and (c) Hootsuite, HubSpot, or Sprout Social for digital/social media implementation and evaluation. Some of those companies already offer educator access or specialty programs, such as HubSpot's Education Partner Program (HubSpotb, n.d.) and Muck Rack for Educators (Muck Rack, n.d.), that can be adapted for Bateman. Ensuring equal access to technological resources can enhance experiential learning in Bateman by allowing students to engage with products they will find in industry practice.

Communication

Bateman faculty advisers indicated a lack of transparency regarding clear and consistent campaign objectives, possibly creating confusion for students when understanding the expectations of competition and how they will be assessed by judges. One example of that inconsistency is the publication of finalist teams' case summaries on the PRSSA headquarter (HQ) website, which ranged from all three teams (2014-2015; 2020), to only the first-place team (2016-2018; 2021-

2022), to none of the teams (2019). Honorable mentions were presented to between 14.8% and 27.3% of teams from 2014 through 2023, though it is not clear how the quantity of honorable mention teams is determined in any given year and how that distinction is determined. While competition tips are provided in the rules and regulations documentation, no scoring rubric is provided during the competition for teams to understand which campaign elements are assessed and, with what weight, in the overall judging score. That lack of transparent and consistent communication could influence the perception that there is bias in the judging process.

To add greater transparency for Bateman Competition expectations of clients and judges, the judging rubric for the competition may be included as part of competition materials, which is typically published and distributed in October. In addition, the PRSSA Headquarters office, which receives all submissions, may expand the publication of submitted case summaries for a broader overview of campaign perspectives. This expansion serves a dual purpose. First, greater access to previously submitted case studies allows universities that are new to the competition more understanding of the expectations of Bateman case study submissions. Second, publication of case summaries through the PRSSA Headquarters website ensures former participants have access to their work after the competition ends, which can be linked within a portfolio website, LinkedIn profile, and other social media platforms.

Judging

Results of this study indicate that certain advantages can increase the odds a Bateman team will place as a finalist or receive an honorable mention. Winning teams were most likely to come from public universities that offered Bateman as a for-credit project integrated into a class or practicum experience. That model also increased the likelihood that a university could host multiple Bateman, thereby increasing the odds of earning at least an honorable mention. While those advantages do not equate to an explicit bias toward Bateman teams that are solely extracurricular, it does suggest there isn't a level playing field for student teams. As the results of this study found, public universities and/or universities that provide a for-credit Bateman were more likely to place as a finalist or honorable mention in the past decade. A lack of equity in competition resources and student compensation for work, combined with minimal constructive feedback in the judging process, can unfairly benefit teams from more robust public relations programs. As Bateman has significant financial incentives for winning teams, the authors recommend a revision of the judging process to form team divisions—created in consultation with Bateman advisers, judges, and CPRE—to ensure an awards structure that better recognizes diversity, equity, and inclusion of all participating teams.

Conclusion

Bateman has several positive outcomes for experiential learning in an applied setting. However, Bateman suffers from inconsistent management and lack of transparency that can impact the competition's positive reputation, which might explain the 41.7% decrease in submissions since 2018. Bateman will benefit from implementing revised practices ensure a level playing field for all universities that wish to participate. Future exploration of longitudinal data about benefits and challenges of Bateman participation will determine results are a short-time trend or point to a long-term crisis. In addition, future studies about students' perceptions of their competition experience, as well as advisers' competition practices, will add further insights to improve Bateman for future public relations students.

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Appendix A

CPRE "Fast Forward" KSAs that PR Practitioners Agree Entry-Level PR Practitioners Should Have

Knowledge (p. 46)[a]	*M*	Skills (p. 46)[a]	*M*	Abilities (p. 47)[a]	*M*
Ethics	4.51	Writing	4.85	Creative Thinking	4.53
Diversity & Inclusion	3.95	Communication	4.75	Problem Solving	4.49
Cultural Perspective	3.83	Social Media Management	4.39	Critical Thinking	4.45
Business Acumen	3.76	Research & Analytics	4.16	Analytical Thinking	4.38
Social Issues	3.73	Editing	4.11	Strategic Planning	3.58
PR Laws & Regulation	3.60	Media Relations	4.01		
PR Theory	3.44	Storytelling	3.98		
Global Perspectives	3.41	Public Speaking	3.54		
Internal or Employee Communication	3.59	Graphic Design	3.00		
Crisis Management	2.86	Audio/Video Production	2.94		
Management	2.79	Website Development	2.93		
PR History	2.33	Speechwriting	2.89		
		App Development	2.07		

[a] 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree

Appendix B

2014-2023 Bateman Case Study Competition Finalists and Honorable Mentions

Year	Client	Total Entries	Finalists	Honorable Mentions
2014	Fiserv (Popmoney)	68	University of Florida[b] California State University, Long Beach[b] Loyola University-New Orleans[b]	Chapman University Kent State University[a, b] Lee University[b] Michigan State University[b] Minnesota State University-Moorhead[a, b] Ohio Northern University Roger Williams University Seton Hall University[a] University of Maryland[b] Utah Valley University[a] (x2)
2015	Home Matters	60	Loyola University-New Orleans[b] University of Florida[b] University of South Carolina[b]	Brigham Young University[a] (x2) California State University-Long Beach[b] Central Washington University Chapman University[a] Minnesota State University-Moorhead[a, b] (x3) Lee University[b] Samford University[b] University of Georgia University of Nebraska-Lincoln[a, b] University of Nevada-Reno[b]
2016	Student Veterans of America	70	The University of Alabama Loyola University-New Orleans[b] Samford University[b]	Brigham Young University[a] (x2) California State University-Long Beach[b] DePaul University[a, b] Grand Valley State University[a] Kent State University[a, b] Oklahoma Christian University San Jose State University Texas Christian University[a] University of Florida[b] University of Nevada-Reno[b] University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Utah Valley University[a] Washington State University[b] Western Kentucky University[a, b]

[a] Multiple team entries
[b] Bateman participants earns class credit

Year	Client	Total Entries	Finalists	Honorable Mentions
2017	Campaign to Change Direction	67	University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill The University of Alabama University of Nebraska-Lincoln[b]	Brigham Young University[a] (x2) DePaul University[a, b] (x2) High Point University James Madison University[a] Kent State University[a, b] (x2) Lee University[b] Loyola University-New Orleans[b] Quinnipiac University[b] St. John Fisher College[b] University of Georgia University of Nevada-Reno[b] University of South Carolina[b]
2018	With Purpose	84	Louisiana State University Kent State University[a, b] California State University, Long Beach[b]	Chapman University[a] DePaul University[a, b] Indiana University[b] Miami University[b] Minnesota State University-Moorhead[a, b] (x2) Ohio University Oklahoma Christian University Olivet Nazarene University San Jose State University St. John Fisher College[b] Syracuse University Texas State University[b] The University of Alabama University of Florida[b] University of Nebraska-Lincoln[b] University of South Carolina[a, b] University of South Florida University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh Washington State University[a, b]

[a] Multiple team entries
[b] Bateman participants earns class credit

Year	Client	Total Entries	Finalists	Honorable Mentions
2019	The PRSA Foundation (Diverse Voices)	66	California State University, Long Beach[b] University of South Carolina[b] Brigham Young University[a]	Brigham Young University[a] DePaul University[a, b] High Point University Kent State University[a, b] (x2) Lee University[b] Loyola University-New Orleans[b] North Dakota State University[a, b] Ohio University Samford University[b] Temple University[b] The University of Alabama University of Florida[b] University of Nebraska-Lincoln[b] University of Nebraska-Omaha University of Nevada-Reno[b] West Texas A&M University Western Kentucky University[a, b]
2020	U.S. Census Bureau	57	DePaul University[a, b] University of Florida[b] High Point University	Ashland University Belmont University[b] DePaul University[a, b] Eastern Illinois University[a] Kent State University[a, b] Loyola University-New Orleans[b] Miami University[b] Ohio University Syracuse University University of Nebraska-Lincoln[b] University of Nevada-Reno[a, b] University of Oregon[b] University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh
2021	PRSA Civility Taskforce	54	California State University-Long Beach[b] University of Nebraska-Lincoln[b] Loyola University-New Orleans[b]	California State University-Fullerton Kent State University[a, b] Otterbein University University of Central Oklahoma[a] University of Georgia University of Nebraska-Omaha University of South Carolina[b] Washington State University[a, b]

[a] Multiple team entries
[b] Bateman participants earns class credit

Year	Client	Total Entries	Finalists	Honorable Mentions
2022	Lymphoma Research Foundation	51	University of Nebraska-Lincoln[b] University of Florida[b] Brigham Young University[a]	California State University, Long Beach[b] Central Michigan University High Point University Kent State University[a, b] (x2) Louisiana State University Montclair State University Temple University[b] University of Georgia University of Oregon[b] West Texas A&M University
2023	News Literacy Project	49	University of Florida[b] University of Colorado-Boulder[a, b] Louisiana State University	Brigham Young University[a] High Point University Kent State University[a, b] Montclair State University Ohio University Oklahoma Christian University Penn State[a, b] St. John's University[a, b] (x2) University of Delaware[a, b] University of Nebraska-Lincoln[a, b] University of South Carolina[a, b]

[a] Multiple team entries
[b] Bateman participants earns class credit

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Moral Entrepreneurship as a Framework for Teaching Public Relations and Activism: University Educators' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study explored public relations educators' perceptions of incorporating the concept of moral entrepreneurship, defined as the process of establishing new ethical norms to address societal issues, into public relations curricula. Analysis of 25 interviews with educators from diverse backgrounds showed a generally positive stance toward incorporating moral entrepreneurship, as it aligns with public relations education's goal of cultivating ethically conscious change agents. Educators emphasized that teaching moral entrepreneurship could occur across various courses and pedagogical strategies, including discussions, debates, and simulations. However, challenges were identified, particularly in overcoming historical resistance to activism within public relations and the potential hesitance of faculty to embrace curriculum changes. Concerns about academic freedom and administrative influence also emerged as significant barriers. The study underscores the need for collective advocacy and collaboration to successfully implement moral entrepreneurship in public relations education.

Keywords: moral entrepreneurship, ethical norms, activism, public relations pedagogy, curriculum development, academic freedom

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The connection between public relations and activism has evolved into a burgeoning area of research, going beyond the conventional view of activists as mere threats and disruptors of organizational operations (Ciszek, 2018, 2017, 2015; Demetrious, 2013; Dhanesh & Sriramesh, 2020; Dozier & Lauzen, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; 2012b).

Coombs and Holladay (2012a) emphasized the importance of challenging the corporate-centric perspective of public relations and recognizing the significant contributions made by activists in shaping the field. Demetrious (2013) echoed this view by arguing that while attempting to keep activists' perspectives at bay, organizations continue practicing activism through "the most dynamic, creative and effective organizational communication" (p. 2).

There is a growing scholarly interest in exploring activism and its role in driving change both within organizations and in society at large (Bardhan & Gower, 2022; Berger, 2005; Berger & Reber, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2012; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). The activist approach, a leadership model for inclusive diversity in public relations developed by Bardhan and Gower (2022), aims to drive transformations in professional culture, and by extension, in society at large. In fact, Holtzhausen (2012) argued that public relations as activism is an indispensable prerequisite for the establishment of a just society. The implementation of this approach could foster positive changes within organizations and society, making it an essential focus of research and practice in contemporary public relations.

Despite its significance for both theoretical understanding and practical applications, activism studies have not been fully integrated into public relations curricula (Aghazadeh & Ashby-King, 2022; Mules, 2021). Given that public relations education serves as a primary pipeline for preparing future professionals (Berger & Erzikova, 2022), incorporating activism into teaching becomes essential in equipping graduates with a thorough understanding of how to respond to social change movements (Madden & Mahin, 2022) and other critical capabilities.

Social activism in public relations is an organized effort to drive social change through communication and advocacy (Demetrious, 2013). This overlaps with social entrepreneurship, which emphasizes creating innovative solutions to social problems through entrepreneurial principles (Dees, 1998). However, moral entrepreneurship (ME), as defined by Kaptein (2019), extends on these concepts by focusing not only on social impact but also on establishing new ethical norms. Unlike social entrepreneurship, which tends to focus on pragmatic solutions, ME seeks to challenge and reshape existing moral standards in society. ME offers a framework for exploring activism as an endeavor to establish new ethical norms and drive societal change. While initially sounding idealistic, this concept gains promise when juxtaposed with the brand activism demonstrated by Gen Z through belief-driven purchasing and brand advocacy (Edelman, 2022). Accordingly, the idea of moral entrepreneurship is likely to resonate with students currently attending public relations classrooms and those to come in the future.

To examine the concept's usefulness and applicability across undergraduate and graduate courses, this study conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 public relations educators from Europe, Oceania, and North America. By analyzing the insights gleaned from the data, the study aims to understand to what extent moral entrepreneurship can be effectively taught and learned at the college level. In doing so, it responds to Mules' (2021) call to examine public relations education approaches and propose curricula that position public relations as a progressive field of knowledge and practice. By integrating activism studies and moral entrepreneurship into public relations curricula, educators have the opportunity to shape future professionals who can effectively respond to evolving societal needs and contribute positively to the field's growth and advancement.

Literature Review

Scholarly research on moral entrepreneurship

The concept of moral entrepreneurship is the purposeful process of changing institutionalized ethical norms and/or creating new values by ethical leaders (Kaptein, 2019). This framework challenges the prevailing definition of ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005, p. 120).

Kaptein (2019) disagreed with the conceptualization of ethical leadership as following the established norm. He argued ethical leadership means leading ethics by being innovative and creating new ethical norms, not adhering to an established moral consensus. For Kaptein, the widely accepted definition of an ethical leader, who is an organizational role model by being a moral person and a moral manager (Brown et al., 2005) should be complemented by a new concept—that of moral entrepreneur. Kaptein puts it bluntly, "One who does not create a new norm but complies with existing ethical norms and stimulates others to follow them is a moral person and a moral manager but not an ethical leader" (p. 1140).

In the moral entrepreneurship process, leaders – whether they are CEOs, PR executives, or other key figures – are attentive to those issues for which a corresponding morality has not yet been developed. Leaders recognize issues that others might not yet perceived as problems. Next, leaders choose an issue that fits their own and/or their organization's moral identity and start generating support for a new ethical norm. Finally, leaders monitor the process to determine if moral entrepreneurship cultivates stakeholder trust and fosters the moral development of society (Kaptein, 2019), which are public relations ultimate goals (Taylor, 2010).

The means (ethics-driven leadership actions) and ends (trust to organization and improving society) seem to align the concept of moral entrepreneurship with public relations scholarship on leadership, ethics and activism (e.g., Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2012). For example, Gaara et al. (2024) contended that moral entrepreneurship is gaining traction due to the increasing complexity and unpredictability of ethical issues in public relations. Their argument underscores the necessity for practitioners to adopt a proactive stance in addressing these challenges by actively shaping ethical norms and advancing societal values. In a recent study (Erzikova & Martinelli, 2022), interviewed U.S. public relations practitioners said an organizational commitment to a moral entrepreneurship approach as a form of activism affords such competitive advantages as recruiting and retaining the best employee talent and improving stakeholder trust. Based on interviews, the concept of moral entrepreneurship provides organizations with a potentially valuable framework to actively recognize societal pressures and problems and act accordingly to better the environment in which the organization resides and operates. While discussing factors that prevent organizations from incorporating moral entrepreneurship, respondents mentioned a limited budget and shortage of staff, resistance to change, fear of failure, poor leadership and a polarized workplace.

Public relations education plays a critical role in shaping practitioners' perspectives and skill sets (Berger & Erzikova, 2022). However, the current emphasis on public relations as a management function in university curricula minimizes the focus on public relations activism, despite practitioners' potential to become effective activist leaders in communities (Holtzhausen, 2000). To advance the field, there is a need for further exploration of moral entrepreneurship within public relations education, reassessing literature and practices to empower future practitioners with the knowledge and tools to enact positive change through ethical leadership and activism. By embracing the concept of moral entrepreneurship, public relations can continue evolving as a progressive discipline, advocating for social justice, and contributing to the betterment of society.

Teaching public relations activism

Over the past two decades, scholars (e.g., Holtzhausen, 2000; Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002) have debated the role of public relations professionals as activists and change agents. Despite this prolonged discussion, the incorporation of public relations activism into PR curricula remains scarce (Mules, 2021).

On a positive note, there has been some progress in recent years, with some post-2000 public relations textbooks now including discussions of activism from two distinct perspectives. The first perspective examines issue/crisis, where activists may use PR strategies to impede organizational objectives. The second perspective, termed emancipatory activism, explores how activists can utilize public relations techniques to achieve social objectives (Mules, 2019).

These contemporary textbooks play a vital role in enhancing our understanding of the complex relationship between activism, social movements, and their impact on clients' business success (Mules, 2019). By facilitating classroom conversations about various forms of activism including left- and right-learning perspectives, educators encourage students to review public relations practice and its (emancipatory) role in society (Mules, 2019; 2021). The need for this critical assessment seems especially urgent in the light of such pressing issues as human rights, healthcare access, climate change, gender equality, and racial justice (Edelman, 2023; 2022).

Coombs and Holladay (2012a) and Mules (2021) argued that the integration of activism studies into curricula presents a critical opportunity to challenge the prevailing functionalist approach in teaching public relations. This approach – public relations serves as the management function responsible for developing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and stakeholders – emerged in the initial stages of U.S. public relations education (L'Etang, 2013). This dominant pedagogical perspective often regards public relations as a morally neutral tool utilized for achieving organizational objectives. However, educators who perceive their role as contributing to societal progress should take the initiative to modernize curricula by adopting a critical/pro-social approach. Transitioning to such an approach may face challenges. Those who ground their teaching methods in narrow organizational needs, might perceive activists as potential threats. In contrast, their colleagues may view activists as innovators of strategies and tactics that could be refined and effectively integrated into organizational communication (Dozier & Lauzen, 2000).

Another hindrance to the integration of activism studies into curricula is the dependence on adjunct faculty within universities. These adjunct faculty members may lack the necessary authority or willingness to innovate curricula effectively. This limitation is further exacerbated by universities' emphasis on job placement, which inadvertently diminishes "the pedagogical agency of public relations teacher" (Mules, 2021, p. 4). Consequently, universities increasingly prioritize work-integrated learning, often at the expense of historical and social-cultural perspectives (even though opportunities exist to incorporate service-learning projects into PR classes where students engage with activism- and advocacy-based organizations)

In response to Mules' (2021) call for further research into integrating activism into public relations curricula, Madden and Mahin (2022) spearheaded a collaborative effort among public relations scholars and educators to prepare a special issue of the Journal of Public Relations Education focused on activist public relations. This freely accessible issue aims to provide educators with comprehensive frameworks and practical strategies for effectively incorporating activism into their public relations curriculum.

Specifically, Aghazadeh & Ashby-King (2022) contributed by discussing a critical communication pedagogy framework and corresponding strategies tailored to teaching activism. Brown & Del Rosso (2022) offered insights on supporting guest speakers from underrepresented communities, while Hou & Wang (2022) recommended approaches for integrating creativity into learning content design and delivery. Chernin & Brunner (2022) analyzed strategies to engage Generation Z students with the concept of activism through public interest communication. Furthermore, Rozelle (2022) provided comprehensive guidance for students in creating impactful activist campaigns. This diverse array of contributions demonstrates that activism can and should be addressed from multiple theoretical and practical perspectives across various public relations classes.

Overall, incorporating public relations activism into class discussions enriches students' understanding of the profession's role in societal engagement and prepares them to address contemporary social issues as future practitioners. In this process, moral philosophy and general PR ethics serve as foundational principles guiding ethical conduct within the PR profession, emphasizing transparency, integrity, and respect for stakeholders. Building upon these principles, moral entrepreneurship offers a framework for understanding activism as an endeavor to establish new ethical norms and drive societal change by challenging conventional notions of ethical leadership. PR activism extends beyond professional boundaries by addressing broader societal issues and striving to effect positive change in the community and society at large.

Continuing the ongoing discourse on activism studies in public relations curricula, this study focuses on exploring the concept of moral entrepreneurship (Kaptein, 2019) as a potential framework. To advance this inquiry, the study posits the following research questions:

RQ1: How do educators perceive and evaluate the incorporation of a moral entrepreneurship approach within the public relations curriculum?

RQ2: According to educators' perspectives, what are the primary barriers or challenges hindering the adoption of a moral entrepreneurship approach in the public relations curriculum?

Method

Study Participants

Participants in this study were purposefully selected to ensure the incorporation and comparison of diverse perspectives, thereby enhancing the depth of understanding of the research topics (Polkinghorne, 2015). Efforts were made to recruit individuals with various backgrounds, including gender, country of origin, years of educational experience, types of employing universities, and geographic locations.

Out of twenty-five participants, 13 were women. The respondents represented both public (n=23) and private (n=2) universities, situated in Europe (n=2), Oceania (n=2), and North America (n=21). Among the participants, two universities were primarily teaching-centric, while 23 were research-centric. In the U.S. context, six out of 21 participants were born outside the country, but all obtained their terminal degrees from U.S.-based universities. All but one of the respondents held tenure-track or tenured faculty positions. Their higher education teaching experiences varied from seven to 30 years, and they taught various public relations courses at either undergraduate or graduate levels, or both. Most interviewees were recruited during two major academic conferences in 2022. Whether in person or via email, educators were provided with Kaptein's (2019) definition of moral entrepreneurship and invited to participate in a study gathering teachers' opinions about whether and in what ways the concept should be incorporated into the PR curriculum.

Instrument

To collect data, an interview guide was designed (see Appendix), focusing on respondents' perceptions of the significance of teaching moral entrepreneurship and public relations activism in general. The guide also explored the most suitable classes and pedagogies for teaching the concept of moral entrepreneurship, as well as the challenges that faculty and public relations departments might face when incorporating this concept into the curriculum. Feedback from two public relations educators who participated in a previous study was used to refine the interview guide.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview method was used as this approach is well-suited to stimulate detailed answers and descriptions to allow an in-depth exploration of emerging patterns (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The interviews were conducted via WebEx, lasting between 20 to 60 minutes, with an average duration of 30 minutes, in summer and fall of 2022. Informed IRB consent forms were sent to respondents via email before the interviews, and all participants provided consent for audio-recording. Pseudonyms (e.g., B. L.) were utilized in this manuscript to ensure the confidentiality of the respondents' identities.

Data Analysis

An inductive qualitative analysis of the interview data was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. First, the interview transcripts were read and re-read to ensure familiarity with the data. Second, the transcripts were systematically reviewed, with key words and phrases relevant to the research focus highlighted. During this step, comparisons were made, notes were taken, and questions were asked to generate initial codes. In the third step, the codes were reviewed to remove non-essential ones and to organize the more significant codes into potential categories, which were then subdivided into main themes and sub-themes.

Reflexivity and reactivity were important considerations throughout the research process. To remain mindful of potential biases in interactions and interpretations as well as to maintain objectivity, several strategies were employed. During interviews, a reflexive stance was taken, prioritizing participants' voices and minimizing the researcher's influence. Participants were encouraged to freely express their thoughts and experiences. Member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was performed after the interviews to verify the accuracy of the data.

Findings

Research Question 1 aimed to investigate how educators perceive and evaluate the integration of a moral entrepreneurship approach within the public relations curriculum. The findings revealed a diverse range of perspectives among respondents, spanning from enthusiastic endorsement to cautious consideration, with a majority of participants leaning toward the enthusiastic end of the continuum. The multiplicity of perceptions demonstrated the complexity of the concept and the various pedagogic perspectives that guided the interviewees' teaching practices.

Several key themes emerged during the data analysis. First, public relations educators viewed the concept of moral entrepreneurship as a natural and fitting addition to the curriculum. They recognized its potential to complement and enhance the existing content and structure of public relations education.

Second, respondents suggested that a spiral progression approach should be employed in teaching the concept of moral entrepreneurship. This approach would facilitate a gradual and progressive understanding of the concept, building upon foundational knowledge and skills as students advance through their academic journey.

Third, interviewees expressed that moral entrepreneurship strongly resonates with public relations students, a majority of whom were described as being inherently inclined toward activism. This alignment was seen as advantageous for engaging students and developing a sense of purpose and social responsibility within the discipline.

Fourth, some participants perceived the concept of moral entrepreneurship as merely a new label for a pre-existing and well-established idea within the field of public relations. This viewpoint highlighted the need for clarity and differentiation of the concepts in the curriculum.

Lastly, educators issued a word of caution, warning that the incorporation of the moral entrepreneurship concept could be fraught with potential challenges and pitfalls. They emphasized the importance of thoughtful implementation, ensuring that the concept is presented in a balanced manner, addressing potential controversies or conflicts that may arise.

Theme One: Natural Fit

The concept of moral entrepreneurship was regarded by most public relations educators as fitting seamlessly within the public relations curriculum. One overarching concern that emerged during the discussion was whether morality could be effectively taught and learned—a topic that has been debated since ancient times, as M.E. pointed out. However, rather than striving solely for the noble goal of nurturing morality in students, educators found it more practical to equip them with skills and approaches to navigate ethical and moral dilemmas within their organizations.
In essence, this task might be a part of the ME curriculum, which underscores not just understanding ethics but actively applying moral reasoning to influence positive change. H.Y. emphasized the timeliness of the ME concept, as it provides an opportunity to discuss the role of public relations in times of rapid change and upheaval.

B.L. said, "If you're teaching PR, you're most certainly teaching change agents." Yet, B.L. warned that a new norm is not given/imposed but developed through conversation and brainstorming: "A new norm is what we are working on as a collective." M.N. explained that the ME concept "captures in a couple of words what we want students to become when they join the profession: Put morals and ethics first." To M.N., the word "entrepreneurship" in the phrase means students can pursue different paths while doing the right things. Given that societal factors affect public relations, the ME concept should be part of the public relations curriculum, D.G. said. To a degree, the concept has always been part of education: "I think everyone who teaches PR has it as an undercurrent of how they teach it." What is different these days is that approaches to teaching the concept are being systematized and formalized, according to D.G.

Based on K.A.'s teaching experience, students might take a "whole ethics course" but still might not grasp the relevance of the course content to their professional future. In this sense, the ME concept "helps them see how to think about issues and how we can change our behavior or the organization's behavior to meet societal demands." The ME concept offers a way to "really engage students as future leaders with ethics" as opposed to "just looking at case studies."

K.E. said educators are familiar with such concepts as an ethical guardian/moral conscience, but "maybe that does stop too short or it's just kind of an underdeveloped concept." Meanwhile, the idea of moral entrepreneurship with its activist component "really does give some steps that we could take to incite change." In her opinion, the concept provides an opportunity to talk about moral courage or "how do you actually put it to work where the rubber meets the ground?"

In E.A.'s opinion, teaching the concept at the college/university level sends students a clear message that entrepreneurship is not limited to the CEO level, but "happens across different ranks and positions." A.A. said ME helps explain the importance of studying ethics: "I think this is the kind of reason we're studying ethics and how to use ethics to change current norms that might be out of date." H.Y. stated that educators should "point to what's actually going on in our society and on an international scale in any public relations classroom."

Overall, most of interviewed educators found ME to be a natural fit within the curriculum, noting its effectiveness in equipping students with skills to navigate ethical dilemmas in their organizations. The respondents also emphasized that moral entrepreneurship allows instructors to contextualize ethical issues in broader contexts (e.g., economic, political, social, cultural), making it a timely and valuable addition to public relations education.

Theme Two: Spiral Progression Approach

Most interviewees acknowledged the alignment of the ME concept with the public relations curriculum, emphasizing the importance of its integration into every PR class. Respondents proposed an approach aiming to help students progress from simple to complex concepts, thus, reinforcing their understanding and application of ME in public relations. This method was described by Bruner (1960) as a spiral curriculum.

The spiral progression approach emphasizes the integration of moral entrepreneurship into every PR class, evolving from introductory courses to more complex service-learning experiences. Interviewees envisioned the expansion and reinforcement of knowledge in subsequent classes, with service-learning courses occupying the apex of the spiral. For instance, S.Y. shared her experience of involving students in a reading program for disadvantaged local residents, fostering social awareness and attunement to societal demands. Furthermore, E.A. thought various organizations on campus provide public relations students with opportunities to change the ways these organizations operate, making them more attuned to societal demands.

Interviewees emphasized the significance of developing critical thinking in teaching public relations activism, as it encompasses essential elements of moral courage and moral autonomy, S.N. said. To achieve this, S.N. adopted the Paul-Elder Critical Thinking Framework, a systematic approach for developing and assessing critical thinking abilities (Paul & Elder, 2020) in management and ethics classes, considering it foundational for both pursuits. S.N. also suggested including reading moral philosophy into the course to ensure students are equipped with a framework to "understand the philosophical traditions for problem-solving when they're approaching a problem, rather than just trying to rely on more of an ad hoc approach."

Some interviewees suggested offering a stand-alone ME class, attracting students interested in entrepreneurship as a tool for creating positive social impact. This would be a way to influx the industry with professionals who are not only passionate about being change agents but also equipped with knowledge and skills to take on this role. Currently, as several educators noted, the industry "hasn't provided many good examples of organizations making real changes in society" (F.A).

Anticipating such a dilemma as conceptual vs. skills classes adoption, M.N. said the course type does not matter: "Even technical skills like writing press releases can be taught though a moral framework." The essential aspect lies in "a concerted effort between everybody who teaches courses in the sequence" (L.A.) to map out the curriculum progression. Collaborative planning among all courses, both undergraduate and graduate, ensures that the ME concept is effectively integrated into the learning journey.

Various pedagogical methods were suggested to effectively address different aspects of the ME concept. Case studies emerged as the most favored approach, facilitating the examination of real-world scenarios with ethical considerations. Other methods, such as discussions, debates, simulations, and guest speaking engagements, were also deemed effective in creating a deep understanding and active engagement with the ME concept.

To summarize, the participants viewed the spiral progression approach as a dynamic method of teaching moral entrepreneurship in the public relations curriculum. Importantly, the integration of moral philosophy alongside the utilization of diverse pedagogical methods significantly enhances students' capabilities to effectively tackle ethical dilemmas.

Theme Three: Great Resonance

The respondents in this study acknowledged that their students showed a remarkable predisposition to embrace new norms, both explicitly and implicitly. M.T. highlighted that concepts of ethical leadership and stakeholder capitalism deeply resonate with undergraduates, who inherently understand the expectations of businesses beyond short-term profit-driven motives:

> I think the undergrads mostly just operate under the so-called new norms. They don't know necessarily that term, but they intuitively know what to expect out of businesses and it's a different approach than just a hard short-term bottom-line emphasis.

Similarly, L.E. observed that students responded strongly to the idea of "a longer-term motive or not only profit motive behind the organization." Interviewees further noted that students appreciated classroom discussions on incorporating organizational mission, vision, and values into campaign goals. As emphasized by L.E., moral entrepreneurship serves as a lens to clarify decision-making processes and helped students comprehend their contributions to such choices.

L.E. shared an insightful lesson learned from students during a PR campaigns class. When a local diner, a class client, planned a fundraising event involving the police department, students felt uneasy about the potential implications of customer-police interactions. Although students did not voice their concerns at first, the event turned out to be unsuccessful due to customer complaints. L.E. acknowledged the value of trusting students' feedback and fostering an open environment for dialogue and learning. While this lesson may not explicitly describe the creation of a new ethical norm, it does illustrate the process of challenging existing norms, considering alternative approaches, and developing a culture where ethical considerations are prioritized and discussed openly.

S.Y. emphasized that students highly valued discussions of "the role they will play as citizens of our democracy" and the importance of ethical considerations in PR practices. Similarly, L.A. highlighted the appeal of the ME concept, which differentiates between those following ethical norms out of obligation and entrepreneurs who shape new norms. However, instructors should create a safe space in the classroom, encouraging critical thinking without making students feel targeted. "I'm trying to challenge you and everybody else in this room, myself included, to think more and to dig deeper into what's being said. By doing that, we're helping them to become critical thinkers," L.A. said. While recognizing that students might not always adhere to normative approaches in real-world scenarios, L.A. stressed the significance of teaching them ideal ethical and professional standards in PR processes. The goal is to empower students to understand and navigate ethical complexities with an awareness of the industry's ethical aspirations, she said.

Overall, the interviewees emphasized that the concept of moral entrepreneurship found great resonance among students, fostering their desire to engage critically and ethically with the evolving world of public relations. Through these meaningful classroom discussions and an emphasis on ethical leadership, students are better equipped to contribute positively to both the industry and society, the respondents said. However, none of the participants were aware of PR programs offering opportunities for moral entrepreneurship in extracurricular activities, highlighting a potential gap in integrating ethical leadership and activism into co-curricular experiences, such as student-led advocacy campaigns.

Theme Four: A New Label for an Old Practice

Several interviewees emphasized that the ME concept is not a novel idea in the public relations industry and academia. Public relations professionals have been engaged in practices aimed at improving local communities and societal issues for decades, albeit under different labels, B.E., a public relations veteran, said.

While some interviewees expressed the need to discuss the institutionalization of ethics rather than the ME concept, they highlighted the crucial role of public relations professionals as conscience and values managers for their organizations. Their responsibility lies in instilling and communicating organizational values to both internal and external stakeholders. S.E., with a 20-year academic teaching career, recognized the importance of teaching students to identify current social issues and challenges, which aligns with the initial step of the ME approach. However, S.E. viewed this process as part of environmental scanning for risk assessment to protect the brand, not necessarily to assess outdated norms. Nonetheless, organizations can still introduce policy changes that positively affect society while aligning with their mission and purpose, S.E. said.

R.H. supported S.E.'s perspective, stating that moral entrepreneurship should manifest as a natural extension of organizational values. D.N. expressed discomfort with the ME concept by noting that the combination of "moral" and "entrepreneurship" appears contradictory suggesting that the pursuit of profit and business success may conflict with ethical considerations.

Overall, the respondents argued that the concept of moral entrepreneurship seems to encompass practices that have been present (under different titles) in the industry for years. While some prefer alternative discussions on ethics institutionalization, others recognize the value of teaching students to identify and address social issues as part of their public relations responsibilities. In addition, the pursuit of moral entrepreneurship should align with an organization's core values and mission, highlighting the importance of leading meaningful change within both the organization and the broader community.

Theme Five: Fraught with Peril

A few participants, including M.A. and R.H., expressed caution regarding the integration of entrepreneurship with moral values. While recognizing the importance of addressing the concept of moral entrepreneurship, M.A. warned against instilling the idea of change in graduates that might lead them to perceive themselves as “heroic figures akin to Disney characters.” Such a mindset could potentially harm their careers, especially at the entry-level, as advocating for radical change without a careful approach may backfire.

Moreover, M.A. highlighted the risks for organizations in taking a radical stand on issues. While larger companies like Nike may withstand the loss of certain customer subgroups, smaller companies could face severe consequences, such as bankruptcy, by involving themselves in controversial issues, M.A. said.

R.H. emphasized that implementing a ME program implies portraying the organization as a nearly perfect entity. However, the risk lies in media and other stakeholders labeling such programs as greenwashing, or as an attempt to distract from less ethical organizational practices. Consequently, the program could cause more harm than good in the eyes of the public.

Adding to the complexity, R.H. noted that differing ethical perspectives exist even within one market. For instance, some customers might perceive a company’s decision to stop selling guns as a moral entrepreneurship move, while others might view it as an attack on their Second Amendment rights in the U.S.

To summarize, the participants believed that the concept of moral entrepreneurship carries inherent risks and challenges, from potential disillusionment among graduates to the precarious position smaller organizations face when engaging in radical advocacy. Additionally, implementing ME programs necessitates portraying an organization as ethically sound, despite the existence of multiple ethical perspectives within the market. Understanding these perils is crucial in navigating the complexities of moral entrepreneurship and its impact on individuals and organizations alike.

Research Question 2 investigated the educators' perspectives on the primary barriers or challenges hindering the incorporation of a moral entrepreneurship approach in the public relations curriculum. Through participant insights, a wide range of factors, including individual, institutional, and their intersection, emerged as significant obstacles to implementing the concept in academia.

Individual level

Data analysis revealed several barriers that hinder the incorporation of the ME concept into the public relations curriculum at the individual level.

First, faculty members might be hesitant to adopt the ME approach due to feeling overworked and underpaid, considering it as an additional burden. The challenges of managing existing responsibilities might deter educators from embracing new topics and teaching methodologies. In the words of S.E., "Unless you're a specialist in public relations ethics, I don't know that you're going to devote the time you need to read books, philosophies, journal articles, even PR Week articles."

Second, some faculty members may be resistant to stepping out of their comfort zones, particularly if they have been teaching certain classes in a particular manner for decades and have found it effective. As L.A. said, "If you're teaching 4 or 5 classes a semester, you're not probably thinking too much about the big picture. Those folks aren't necessarily thinking about moral entrepreneurship when they're trying to teach AP style, right?" Embracing change and incorporating a novel approach like moral entrepreneurship may require effort and willingness to adapt teaching methodologies.

Third, disagreements among colleagues with differing political views might pose a challenge in reaching a consensus on how to implement moral entrepreneurship into the curriculum and what topics to cover. For instance, differing opinions on activism, where the focus might be on liberal activism while neglecting other types, could create discord among faculty. For example, one interviewee argued the current discourse about activism presumes liberal activism and fails to acknowledge other types. He said, "Why can't we teach students about how to do far right activism or how to promote nationalism, which is activism too?"

Fourth, faculty may perceive teaching the ME concept as challenging due to concerns about students' readiness to engage in complex thinking. B.A. said,

> They come from smaller markets and they've been brought up by moms and dads who are opinionated sometimes. And they've been warned that faculty are going to pollute their brains with ideas that are foreign to them. But it's still our job to let them see that there's a bigger world out there.

Furthermore, some students' parents may equate discussions about social change with indoctrination, leading to a wall of resistance between learners and educators. This parental perception can limit the scope for meaningful dialogue and exploration of diverse perspectives in the classroom, several participants said.

Lastly, faculty members who are unaware of their own privileges might not be interested or feel equipped to teach classes related to social change. The lack of awareness about their own biases and privileges could impede their ability to effectively guide students in understanding and navigating complex societal issues and the ethical responsibilities of leaders throughout this process (Kaptein, 2019).

Overall, the interviewees emphasized that addressing these individual-level barriers would require proactive efforts from educators to embrace change, encourage open-minded discussions, and raise awareness about the significance of moral entrepreneurship in public relations education. Overcoming these challenges is essential in creating a curriculum that prepares students to become ethical leaders and change agents in their future careers.

Institutional level

At the institutional level, several barriers were identified that hinder the incorporation of the ME concept into the public relations curriculum.

First, limited departmental resources were highlighted as a significant obstacle. Educators acknowledged the need to prioritize battles due to constraints in adding new courses or hiring additional faculty to teach the ME concept: "We have to choose our battles. Realistically, we're not going to be able to get X number of courses added, or we're not going to be able to hire the folks to teach it."

Second, the bureaucracy of curriculum development emerged as a serious challenge. The process of implementing curriculum changes was described as time-consuming, leading to delays in introducing new concepts like moral entrepreneurship. However, some educators mentioned the possibility of a grassroots approach where, in the words of M.A., "a group of activist teachers takes this on in their own and implement the entrepreneurship through the curriculum more efficiently."

Third, enrollment pressures were noted as a barrier, as public relations programs tend to focus on professional and vocational training to attract students. The competition among universities for students often results in an emphasis on skill-based courses, with conceptual courses that foster critical thinking taking a backseat. The shift toward skill-based training may hinder the intellectual development of students. According to F.A., students seem unaware that conceptual courses that develop critical thinking are being replaced with classes that offer skills that "can be learned by watching YouTube videos." I.N. supported F.A., stating that the current preparation focuses more on "producing PR technicians." Additionally, B.A. expressed the concern that the emphasis on various projects within the curriculum may be superficial, merely for display purposes.

Lastly, top university administrators' perception of activism as a "dirty word" was cited as a significant challenge. The fear that teaching the ME concept may be seen as promoting protests might create uneasiness among administrators and faculty, leading to a reluctance to take risks in introducing new and potentially controversial concepts. Overall, the respondents recognized that addressing these institutional-level barriers necessitates the collective effort of educators, administrators, and accrediting bodies. There is a need for strategic resource allocation, active advocacy for curriculum changes, and a transformative shift in the perception of activism within academia to ensure public relations education evolves to embrace the concept of moral entrepreneurship.

Institutional/Individual level

Participants expressed apprehension about teaching the ME concept due to a perceived lack of support for academic freedom within their universities. This fear of potential repercussions on their job security led some educators to hesitate in navigating sensitive topics like public relations activism in the classroom. Several U.S. interviewees felt uncertain about what conversations would be deemed appropriate for the classroom. Even in states without explicit restrictions, there was a prevailing concern that similar constraints might be imposed in the future. Horror stories about faculty facing consequences for discussing controversial topics or being placed on certain lists intensified these fears.

Some educators felt the need to be cautious when addressing sensitive topics in class, as even mentioning controversial concepts could potentially lead to negative consequences. For instance, I.N. shared that discussing LGBTQ+ issues elicited strong reactions from certain students, creating an uncomfortable atmosphere in the classroom. The respondents believed they could be at risk of being "cancelled" by students, with little support from the administration, even when fulfilling their teaching responsibilities. "Even if educators are being very objective in teaching, their students or their superiors may not," I.N. concluded.

In addition, economic pressures on universities have led to increased reliance on adjunct faculty. These adjunct faculty members might not be as well-versed in recent research-based trends and concepts like moral entrepreneurship due to time constraints and limited resources. Streamlining course expectations becomes challenging when not all faculty members are on board with introducing novel ideas, the interviewees said.

Overall, the respondents contended that universities should provide adequate support and protection to faculty members who engage in discussions on sensitive topics, ensuring they can teach with confidence. Additionally, addressing economic pressures and promoting professional development opportunities for adjunct faculty will contribute to creating a more cohesive and inclusive curriculum that incorporates the concept of moral entrepreneurship effectively.

Discussion

This study aimed to shed light on the receptiveness of educators toward the moral entrepreneurship framework and uncover any obstacles that may impede its implementation in public relations education. Two broad conclusions can be drawn from this study. Regarding Research Question 1, which focused on educators' perceptions and evaluation of incorporating a moral entrepreneurship approach within the public relations curriculum, the study revealed a generally positive outlook. These participants believed the concept of moral entrepreneurship holds potential for inclusion in public relations curricula, either as a separate course or as a module in existing ones, or both. It aligns with a vital goal of public relations education, which is to nurture morally conscious change agents. Teaching moral entrepreneurship across the curriculum emerged as an effective approach to pursue this goal. Incorporating the concept requires a commitment from a majority of faculty willing to collaborate and evolve the curriculum. A spiral curriculum allows for a gradual progression from basic to complex, keeping the concept alive for at least three years and allowing undergraduates to witness real-life examples of moral entrepreneurship over time.

Virtually any pedagogy can be used to teach moral entrepreneurship, necessitating inter-departmental coordination to ensure students learn through various approaches. Discussions serve as a platform for students to exchange ideas and critically evaluate the integration of moral entrepreneurship into organizational and leadership practices. Debates complement this by encouraging students to articulate and defend their viewpoints, thus honing critical thinking and communication skills. Simulations provide immersive learning experiences, allowing students to role-play various scenarios and gain firsthand insights into the complexities of ethical decision-making in public relations.

While service learning was highly valued for its hands-on nature, instilling moral philosophy and moral decision-making early on is crucial for impactful senior-level projects. Some respondents believed reducing moral entrepreneurship to mere case studies would be a disservice, as students should understand the moral reasoning behind socially-focused entrepreneurial actions. Preparing change agents means students understand morality suffuse public relations duties and, as Chernin and Brunner (2022) pointed out, create change while still being in classroom. Educators demonstrated a social-mindedness similar to their Gen Z students, leading to a synergy that enriches the teaching and learning experience. The willingness to learn from students fosters a fulfilling educational environment, capitalizing on their belief in societal change (Parker & Igielnik, 2020) and equipping the students with skills to drive positive transformation. While it would be naïve to assume that all graduates will engage in activist behavior, it is plausible that emerging student leaders who embrace the concept of moral entrepreneurship during their college education may be more inclined to question established professional norms in public relations, such as prioritizing clients' interests and brand reputation. This inclination could enable them to envision and advocate for change at organizational, industry, and societal levels by considering broader societal or ethical implications. However, further research is needed to determine the extent to which these graduates actually implement moral entrepreneurship in their professional practices. The emphasis on leadership in creating new social norms underscores the potential impact of public relations as a discipline that significantly influences society (Holtzhausen, 2000).

Regarding Research Question 2, which examined the primary challenges and obstacles educators face in implementing a moral entrepreneurship approach within the public relations curriculum, the study identified several key barriers. One significant theme that emerged relates to the challenges of integrating moral entrepreneurship as a form of activism within public relations curricula. Historically, L'Etang (2016) highlighted historical opposition between public relations and activism, with areas like issue management and crisis management arising in the 1960s and 1970s as a "protective strategy against radical societal critiques" (p. 207).

Interestingly, according to study participants, some educators still perceive activism as a threat to organizations, arguing that public relations professionals should primarily focus on safeguarding the brand from harm. Overcoming this perspective necessitates legitimizing activist viewpoints in the curriculum (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a) through collective efforts within the educators' community. This is particularly significant as the scope of public relations continues to broaden, requiring a wider range of expertise and prompting the curriculum to integrate more courses that address industry demands (Mules, 2021). As a result, the inclusion of emerging topics, such as moral entrepreneurship, may be restricted.

Furthermore, the study revealed that some instructors may dismiss moral entrepreneurship as an oxymoron, choosing instead to adhere to traditional public relations teachings from renowned ethics scholars. This approach definitely holds value. What is concerning is academic inertia, when faculty display little inclination (mainly due to lack of resources) to explore innovative approaches and enhance the curriculum, according to the participants.

The respondents also expressed doubts about the university's commitment to protecting free expression, which further undermines opportunities for curriculum changes. While addressing challenges like faculty inertia can be managed at the department level, the second challenge involving university administration presents more significant difficulties.

So-called managerialism or the power of administrators reduces the autonomy of the professoriate (Altbach, 2001; Savage, 2022) might discourage faculty from introducing curricula changes seen as politically or ideologically sensitive. In this study, several educators made it clear they surveil themselves in classroom that is no longer perceived as a safe and sacred space to discuss various ideas (Atay, 2022). Challenging the administration is a job jeopardizing activity, the participants said.

To promote change, support from academic organizations and stakeholders is crucial, urging lawmakers to safeguard academic freedom and encourage including activism in the curriculum. Clearly, collaboration and collective advocacy are necessary to prepare students as change agents, driving societal transformation through the field of public relations.

Limitation and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, although an attempt was made to recruit diverse participants, only four out of the 25 participants resided outside of the U.S. In addition, only six out of the 21 U.S. participants were born outside of the U.S. Regardless of their location, all respondents were well familiar with U.S. scholarship and public relations curricula, which might have affected their responses. Building upon the findings presented in this study, further research in a non-Western setting on educators' perspectives regarding activism in general and moral entrepreneurship in particular should be undertaken.

Future research on activism should extend beyond the demographic categories used in this study—such as gender, country of origin, years of educational experience, types of employing universities, and geographic locations—to include individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, LGBTQ+, and other underrepresented groups. This inclusion recognizes activism's diverse impacts and ensures that underrepresented voices are heard and valued in academic discourse.

In light of Holtzhausen's (2000) concept of individuals as activists, the role of a public relations educator as an activist deserves a separate study. If there is a belief that public relations programs graduate future change agents, it would be interesting to explore whether and to what degree those who teach them receive adequate education on the importance of activism and moral entrepreneurship. Future studies should also explore how violations of academic freedom by university administrators and other officials affect public relations curricula in terms of teaching activism and social change.

Finally, the next project can be a content analysis examining whether and how public relations activism and its derivatives (e.g., moral entrepreneurship) are incorporated into course syllabi at public relations programs across the globe.

Conclusion

As research on organizational activism and activists continues to expand, there is a parallel growth in studies exploring the integration of these concepts into public relations curricula. The primary objective of this study was to explore the concept of moral entrepreneurship—a concept that resonates with Gen Z students—and to discuss its relevance with their instructors, especially those seeking ways to enhance their pedagogical strategies and tactics to ultimately improve the practice of public relations (Madden & Mahin, 2022).

The study highlighted the moral entrepreneurship framework as one of the effective approaches that educators can adopt to equip students with the skills necessary to navigate the ever-changing communications environment and contribute to the emancipatory role of public relations (Mules, 2019). Drawing on empirical data gathered from public relations educators, this research added new perspectives into the topic of teaching activism. Gaining a deeper understanding of public relations educators' perspectives on adopting the concept of moral entrepreneurship is critical for enhancing teaching methods and attracting students who are passionate about activism to pursue this major (Chernin & Brunner, 2022).

However, like any process involving the introduction of changes, this path presents its challenges. It demands not only a strong pedagogical vision but also moral courage, perseverance, and grit. The incorporation of moral entrepreneurship into public relations curricula represents a transformative journey for both educators and students and requires dedication and determination to ensure meaningful implementation.

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Appendix

Interview guide

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in a research study that examines public relations educators' perceptions of whether and in what ways the concept of moral entrepreneurship should be incorporated into the PR curriculum.

I would like to ask you some questions about this topic, which will take up to 60 minutes of your time. I will record and later transcribe your answers. None of these questions will ask you about private matters, and your answers will be kept confidential. None of your comments will be linked to you. Your participation will help me better understand key issues related to leadership development in public relations. The results also may help us better prepare public relations leaders for the future. You may refuse to take part in the study or, if you decide to participate in the study, you may decide not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, or to stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions about this study or your involvement? May I ask the first question?

For the purpose of this study, "moral entrepreneurship" is defined as the purposeful process of changing institutionalized ethical norms and/or creating new values by ethical leaders. An example of moral entrepreneurship is "the manager who, out of respect for animals, led his airline company to be the first to introduce a ban on the transport of dead animals as yacht trophies" (Kaptein, 2019, p. 1139).

1. Do you believe the concept of moral entrepreneurship should be part of the PR curriculum?
2. [If yes], what are best ways to teach the concept to PR students? In what class/classes? In your opinion, what are most powerful pedagogies among those you have used to teach the concept (or PR activism)?
3. Do you believe the industry is interested in young professionals being

moral entrepreneurs (change agents, leaders)? Any example you can share?

4. Are you aware of any PR program that teaches moral entrepreneurship as part of extra-curricular activities? Through mentorship programs?
5. What are the main difficulties of teaching moral entrepreneurship, if any? What do you think prevents many PR departments from incorporating the concept into the PR curriculum?

Thank you for your participation!

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Teaching Brief/GIFT

When Group Work isn't Dream Work: Insights to Enhance Students' Active Participation in Group Projects after the COVID-19 Era

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ABSTRACT

Although collaborative skills are essential in public relations due to its interdisciplinary nature, challenges of group projects are always main barriers to successful implementation in higher education. The challenges are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to decreased student motivation in group work sessions. The article explains diverse strategies derived from intrinsic and extrinsic motivational cues to encourage students' active participation in group projects. These strategies are designed to maximize the intrinsic value of projects while mitigating common concerns and worries about group project work outcomes. Evidence from students shows the effectiveness of these strategies in fostering active participation and positive group outcomes.

Keywords: group project, motivation, intrinsic strategies, extrinsic strategies

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Collaborative skills are essential for public relations professionals because of the interdisciplinary nature and task complexity in the field. In fact, proficiency in teamwork boosts performance, productivity, and creativity (Sanyal & Hisam, 2018). Employers value these skills in new hires, underscoring their importance (Baneres & Conesa, 2017). Educational institutions address these skills by integrating group work into public relations courses, helping students develop crucial competencies. Participation in such activities enhances critical-thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills, leading to academic success and career readiness (De Prada et al., 2022; Freeman & Greenacre, 2011; Slavin, 2014).

Despite the advantages of group work, its implementation poses significant challenges, including unequal workloads, irresponsible group members, and perceived unfair grading (Cera Guy et al., 2019; Darby, 2018). Often, a few students end up shouldering the majority of the work because of the lack of commitment and motivation of others (Hilliard et al., 2020), placing excessive burden on leaders while other students may exhibit free-rider behavior (Kanevsky et al., 2022). Controlling irresponsible behavior, such as meeting participation and work progress, proves difficult without external guidelines and policies. In addition, students often perceive group work grading as unfair because some may receive poor grades despite their efforts, but others receive high scores as a result of the quality of work produced by their peers (Grzimek et al., 2020; Zheng, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the usual challenges in managing courses involving group work. Students showed reduced motivation and enthusiasm for learning, having faced an individual work-oriented approach, lack of commitment, and limited collaboration opportunities during the pandemic (Alhammadi, 2021; Neuwirth et al., 2021; Whelehan, 2020). This has negatively affected their performance and attitudes toward group projects despite their professional importance. A recent Commission on Public Relations Education (2023) report indicated that student engagement has not fully recovered, with instructors noting challenges with postpandemic student engagement and witnessing a shift in students prioritizing the value of their contributions over time spent on coursework. Overall, students display low motivation to engage with class content.

Ryan and Deci (2020) emphasized the lack of motivation as a significant barrier, highlighting its pivotal role in influencing behavioral intention. According to self-determination theory, motivation fulfills individuals' psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, leading to increased willingness and autonomous motivation when individuals value the task at hand (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Motivated individuals form attachments to activities, fostering a task-focused competent orientation (Howard et al., 2021). Consequently, motivated individuals are more likely to engage in suggested tasks compared to those lacking motivation, particularly in educational settings where motivation significantly impacts outcomes (Howard et al., 2021; White et al., 2021).

Two main types of motivation drive individuals' active participation in tasks, namely intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation stems from fulfilling inner values, such as personal achievement, success, and self-development. It maximizes autonomy, relatedness, and self-competence, thus improving performance (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Specifically, helping students understand how tasks align with their class goals and personal plans can enhance intrinsic motivation in university settings.

Sometimes, however, intrinsic motivation alone may not suffice to initiate individuals' motivation toward an activity (Filgona et al., 2020). Often, external pressures, monitoring systems, rewards, or penalties—known as extrinsic motivation—prompt individuals to engage in tasks

(Gunawan et al., 2022). Extrinsic motivation may stimulate competence and relatedness to the task, but autonomy is fulfilled only when individuals internalize its value (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Thus, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational strategies can complement each other to maximize motivation for a task. Consequently, in the class involved in the current study, both motivational approaches were used to enhance students' motivation and performance in group work.

About the Class

The Research Methods in Public Relations course equips students with essential research methodologies for strategic communication. Students learn to craft, implement, and assess research inquiries for various public relations situations. Emphasizing the role of research in strategic decision-making, message formulation, media strategy, and campaign assessment, the course covers methods like secondary research, in-depth interviews, and surveys. The researcher taught two consecutive sections of this course during one academic year at a university in the Midwest with 28–30 students in each. It is a required course for undergraduate students majoring in public relations and strategic communication. Most were juniors, sophomores, and seniors.

The Assignment

The class focused on three research projects (e.g., secondary research, in-depth interview, and survey) to build a comprehensive research portfolio addressing all research processes, results, interpretations, and public relations strategies to enhance a client's communication plan. Students conducted secondary research to analyze the client's internal factors (e.g., communication efforts, resources) and external factors (e.g., media coverage, public perception). They performed a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis to identify areas needing additional strategies. In-depth interviews and online surveys captured public perspectives on client issues, and the students developed questionnaires, conducted interviews and online surveys while interpreting all the data. Based on this research, students recommended public relations strategies in a comprehensive research portfolio.

Intrinsic Motivational Strategies for a Group Project

To boost intrinsic motivation, several class guidelines were designed to align group work with individual plans and choices, promoting personal achievement. To do so, the following steps were taken:

Group Formation

Group formation is intended to promote student autonomy and relatedness. Using the self-assign function in the Canvas tool, students organized themselves into groups of three, granted the freedom to choose their collaborators for the semester. Most of the students were unacquainted, so the chances of having team members they already knew were minimal; nevertheless, working with friends was allowed. The instructor minimized involvement at this stage, intervening only to assist students needing help joining a group. In addition, groups aimed to maintain a minimum number of members to reduce coordination efforts.

Client Selection

A self-driven work environment was also emphasized for a client selection as well. Rather than the instructor assigning a research project for a predetermined client, each team discussed and selected the most suitable client for them to process in the group project. The students were advised to choose a client from well-known or long-established national corporation, nonprofit organizations, and local organizations to help them gather information easily. To do so, each student was asked to consider possible client options before they began group work, requiring everyone to be prepared for their first group meeting. The instructor also provided team discussion time to exchange their ideas for client selection to offer them the opportunity to make their own choices.

Group Contract and Group Chat

Before group work started, each group was asked to spend some time getting to know one another and creating a group contract spelling out expectations for collective work. This included meeting attendance requirements, the due dates for each member's work, and attitudes toward the progress of the group work. After making the contract with collaborative works, they were asked to sign and submit it. The purpose of the group contract was to make students feel highly involved in the group work process by creating their own policies to follow. Specifically, this activity helped students feel a sense of interdependence, cohesion, psychological safety, and confidence. This, in turn, strengthened the belief that investing in group activities would pay off and encouraged students to engage in the cognitive processes crucial to learning (Chang & Brickman, 2018; Van den Bossche et al., 2006).

Role Assignment

During group discussions, all members determined their responsibilities for a specific section of the group work and collaborated to create and submit a group working plan. To clarify roles, a list of required tasks was provided for each research project, allowing students to select tasks for their group work plans. Because many students were new to research methodologies, most tasks were unfamiliar, but through this process, they acquired new knowledge. This approach allowed every group member to autonomously decide their tasks, clarifying areas of leadership and personal responsibilities while minimizing conflicts and preventing free riders or uneven workloads, common obstacles to group effectiveness (Zheng, 2022). Moreover, it enhanced learning outcomes (Bailey et al., 2012) and student satisfaction (Brown, 2010). This approach also facilitated instructor supervision of each member's progress, ensuring high-quality work (Davies, 2009).

Dual Grading System

To ensure equitable grading outcomes and mitigate the impact of others' work, the class adopted a dual grading system. If the entire project met high-quality standards, the group received a collective grade; however, if a particular segment was poor or the overall quality of the group's work fell short, each student received individual grades for all components of the assignment, evaluated based on rubrics and assignment guidelines. Negative perceptions about unfair group grades often stem from instances where one student's grade is affected by others' low-quality work (Grzimek et al., 2020; Zheng, 2022), often leading to stress and avoidance of group work. The dual grading system aims to alleviate such concerns and enhance self-oriented motivation among students by providing individual assessments based on their own contributions.

Extrinsic Motivational Strategies for Group Projects

The aim of extrinsic motivational strategies is to provide a pathway for initiating group work through external regulations, incentives, and monitoring processes even when motivation is low.

In-Class Teamwork Sessions

Even if each member has defined roles, a group cannot run smoothly without a system of checks to ensure their assigned responsibilities. To monitor each person and a group's overall progress throughout the semester, the class had in-class team work sessions—with a mandatory attendance requirement—before completing their project. The main benefits of having in-class time include the following: first, the instructor can check each group and each members' work progress by asking questions and reviewing their work. Second, because attendance is required, students could start working or make progress under the instructors' guidance. In-class sessions are an effective way to increase the quality of the group work because having an additional meetings outside the classroom is one of the main barriers to effective team work, resulting from schedule conflicts, poor communication, and low participation.

Mini Presentation

As part of the official checkpoints for monitoring the progress of group work, each team was required to present the key aspects of their progress to the instructor before the submission date. The primary benefit of conducting these mini presentations was to guarantee that students had completed specific portions before the deadline while receiving direct feedback from the instructor. This approach enabled students to complete their tasks as early as possible and provided ample time for revising certain concepts based on the instructor's advice. In addition, through these presentations, students gained insights from other groups, observing how they approached and completed certain parts in different ways. This series of mini presentations effectively contributed to maximizing the quality of the group work outcomes.

Practice Time Before Implementation

The purpose of another in-class activity was to train the students in using in-depth interviews and surveys in their projects. Before actually implementing the project, each group in the class was paired with another group, allowing students to review and practice with the interview and survey materials each group had prepared; furthermore, they had time for receiving feedback so that each group could see the strengths and weaknesses of their project preparations. This activity exerted some external pressure because each group had to prepare their part to participate in the practice session with members of another group.

Peer Evaluation

Students completed anonymous peer evaluations after each project to monitor group dynamics and mitigate social loafing (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008). This system not only allowed students to reflect on their own contributions and those of their peers but also served as a communication channel between students and the instructor. Peer evaluations provide psychological comfort, enabling students to express concerns about group issues while focusing on their individual performances. Compared to end-of-semester evaluations, which can negatively impact team experiences (Bacon et al., 1999), peer evaluations during the semester are more effective at motivating team members. They allow for adjustments in attitudes and behaviors, promoting reflection, group processing, and individual accountability throughout the semester (Aggarwal & O'Brien, 2008; Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Oakley et al., 2004).

Downgrade System Following Negative Feedback

The class implemented a downgrade system according to the peer evaluation results to make the peer evaluations one of the strong external regulations for the students. Specifically, if a student received two or more negative comments from the peer evaluation, the student's final score was lowered one letter grade. This method served as a robust mechanism to facilitate diligence and quality control in group work because the final grade was the most crucial goal for students.

Extra Credit for Project Leaders and High-Performance Members

Incentives were also provided for the students. Specifically, the class offered extra credit (1% of the total grade) for each project leader and for students who demonstrated excellent performance throughout the semester. Regarding the leadership role, each student in the group took the leader position for different projects, with a minimum level of expectation set to prevent any free-riding situations. Following the review of all the group work, extra credit was applied to students' final grade if they exhibited superior performance. The instructor provided comments on Canvas platform to those students to let them know that they received extra credit for their performance. These incentives proved to be a powerful motivator, encouraging active student participation in leadership roles and the production of high-quality work.

Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes

The aim of the class strategies was to motivate students both intrinsically and extrinsically, ensuring responsible participation and positive group outcomes. Effective implementation depended on students embracing teamwork and performing well. Peer evaluations and students' opinions on teamwork and class policy were used to assess these aspects. During the previous semester students in the same class, operating without specific motivational policies, struggled with peer evaluations. With new policies, students consistently earned scores of eight out of 10 or higher, despite the COVID-19 challenges of low motivation and negative perceptions of teamwork. These strategies enabled active participation and high-quality results. The effectiveness of the class policies was shown in students' comments as well. Most of them were very positive, for example:

- "I am very pleased with the class. It was the first time I had an experience with no issues in teamwork."
- "The teamwork was exceptionally well-managed. I am thoroughly satisfied."
- "Everyone did the work on time, and we communicated well when we needed to. Everyone put in their best work and was super easy to work with."
- "We all work together really well. I have no complaints."
- "They are so hardworking and dedicated, and I couldn't be more blessed to have them as my group mates!"
- "Very pleased with team's outcome and final product"
- "I have no issues with any of my team members. They are both doing such a great job with everything!"
- "The entire team is very good about getting work done on time and communicating throughout."
- "Love my team and they worked well and I appreciate them and their work."

Overall, student comments on the teamwork policies showed high satisfaction, but some mentioned the stringency of in-class meeting times.

These comments were shared with students at the end of the class. Most feedback about class organization was positive, especially measures taken to motivate students and prevent free-rider issues and unfair grading. The following are examples.

- “Reporting about predefining each team member’s role was highly effective. Thanks to that, there was no need to worry about one person shouldering all the work or another team member hardly contributing.”
- “Sometimes, there can be quality gaps in the content produced by each individual but knowing that it wouldn’t affect the overall score and would be evaluated individually was very reassuring.”
- “Even though each person had their role to play, there was usually someone overseeing and leading the overall effort, and having reward for that made it possible to handle the tasks without much stress.”
- “It was the first time we had consistently applied the same rules for team management throughout a semester, and it allowed us to immerse ourselves in team assignments without worry.”

Discussion

Conclusions

Evidence of students’ positive perceptions and satisfaction with group work suggests that class strategies effectively fostered participation and yielded favorable outcomes despite the postpandemic decline in motivation and enthusiasm. This highlights the importance of class policies based on motivational cues, recommended for public relations educators to enhance students’ professional behavior and workplace expectations (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2023). Key lessons on motivational approaches to teaching group projects in public relations emerged from this experience.

First and foremost, recognizing that intrinsic strategies can effectively prepare students for engagement in group projects; these include enabling students to select their own groups, delineating individual responsibilities, and employing a dual grading system. These methods are impactful because they encouraged students to internalize the importance of group work as an integral aspect of their primary responsibilities, rather than viewing it as solely belonging to others. As highlighted in the students' comments, these strategies particularly instilled in students the confidence that their contributions would be equitably assessed, thus fostering a sense of ownership over the group project.

Balancing extrinsic motivational cues, like group control and rewards, with intrinsic efforts is essential to improve students' attitudes and participation. Mandatory teamwork sessions, minipresentations, and peer evaluations created a productive environment and allowed progress to be monitored, preventing free-rider issues and ensuring timely completion of work. Rewarding high-quality work throughout the semester encouraged and recognized student efforts. This combination of motivational strategies enhanced class effectiveness, demonstrating that using various approaches together was more effective than relying on a single one or selecting certain strategies while disregarding others.

These class strategies produced additional effects, which boosted the overall outcomes of the class team project, which is consistent with interactions between the instructor and group members. Because each implementation allowed the instructor to focus on each group's progress, the overall communication and comments per person naturally increased, providing an impression of active engagement between the students and instructor.

Future Studies

The success of these teaching techniques may be the result of the impact of COVID-19 on student motivation and learning. Future researchers should explore their effectiveness in stable, traditional settings. In addition, to ease challenges with policies like mandatory attendance, instructors should explain the importance of team projects and address students' difficulties in adhering to them.

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Teaching Brief/GIFT

Respecting Students' Privacy Boundaries and Media Use Preferences while Teaching with Online Digital Tools

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ABSTRACT

Course requirements involving submissions on publicly viewable websites have the potential to cross or violate privacy boundaries. Building on Petronio's Communication Privacy Management Theory, I reflect on these challenges and the ways that I have found to give students choices and control over both their uses and personal information, and offer an example of such strategies through assignments I use in teaching concepts related to digital literacy, which I call "Online Activity Journals."

Keywords: privacy, social media, online tools, interactive media, digital literacy, Communication Privacy Management Theory

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Rationale

In an undergraduate course I teach called Interactive Media and Society, one of my main pedagogical objectives is to engage students in the critical dimension of digital literacy, encouraging "a more systematic understanding of how the media operate, and … more reflective use of the media" (Buckingham, 2008, p. 115). To that end, several years ago, I came up with the idea that I would ask a student to volunteer to be "googled" in front of the class, as a way of showing the students that personal information is more public and easily accessible than many realize in the digital age. The very first time I tried this, it went disastrously wrong. An earnest, outgoing, and personable young lady was the first to volunteer. I pulled up her google results and began scrolling through the list of links projecting aspects of her past accomplishments, along with links to and images from her social media profiles. As I began summarizing out loud what we were looking at, I unexpectedly glimpsed a headline and excerpted passage from a news article about a sibling of hers who had died tragically, her own name bolded as one of the grieving family members. I quickly closed the page and moved on without mentioning it, but I could see on her face and those of some classmates that they had seen it, too. My point had been made – you may not realize what kind of information is online about you – but the more powerful lesson was for me.

My instructional objective had been achieved at the expense of this student's privacy and ability to control what kinds of information about herself she wanted to disclose to her peers. It was then that I soberly realized the responsibility that we as educators have to protect students' privacy as they willingly put their trust in us to guide them through the perilous terrain of digital media. Particularly in classes that emphasize the intended and unintended consequences of technology, it is inappropriate to simply treat it as a "transparent or neutral 'teaching aid'" (Buckingham, 2007, p. 50). If we want to encourage our students to be more thoughtful about their uses of digital media, then we should be as well.

Privacy Violations

Petronio's (1991) Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory suggests that all of our interpersonal relationships rely on a coordination of, and respect for, boundaries surrounding the solicitation and sharing of private information. This information necessarily includes student work requested by teachers, and some students may be less comfortable sharing their submissions beyond the boundaries of that relationship than others. In a review of the literature applying CPM, Petronio and Child (2020) found the online context complicates people's ability to manage their own privacy boundaries when sharing information, but they are still aware of the possibility for violations and make efforts to mitigate them.

When it comes to privacy on the Internet, even when personal information is freely and voluntarily shared, violations are still experienced when something happens that leads to unwanted or unexpected exposure (Barnes, 2006). The research on the use of publicly accessible digital tools in the classroom supports the notion that privacy concerns are held by both professors and students (Hickerson & Kothari, 2017). Attempts to fully integrate tools like social networking sites into formal learning environments have been shown to receive negative reviews from students, in part because of privacy issues (Tess, 2013). Rodriguez (2011) adds the broader legal context:

> Even though social media tools being used do not collect enough personally identifiable data to threaten FERPA laws in most cases, the issue of student privacy in the broader context is still one that should be strongly considered. There was once a time when events that happened in a classroom were ephemeral and intangible, restricted to only the participants present and the extent that their memory would retain them. Using mediated tools that capture discussions and activities in an open public space fixes these events for digital perpetuity and makes them potentially available to a world audience. (p. 543)

To be sure, requiring students to sign up for and use a publicly available website as a part of their participation in a class borders an ethical gray area. Respecting students' privacy also extends to their media use preferences, especially when it comes to social media. Students who choose not to have a profile on certain sites for personal reasons are asked to set those reasons aside when the use of the site is a class requirement. On the other hand, for those students who do already use a required site, the instructor gains access to their entire profile, history, and a feed, which they would not otherwise have been likely to access, creating the potential for unintentional violations of privacy. Engaging students in activities and exercises that involve digital media and technology means that we must be sensitive to the potential consequences of their uses.

Critical Digital Literacy

Despite these challenges, courses that teach media or digital literacy gain huge instructional advantages by engaging students with the products of their study (Jenkins et al., 2006). Most students today are fully immersed in the online world, and their uses already extend to their informal learning as well (Bulfin & North, 2007). Yet despite their typically frequent use of digital tools, many students fall short of using them for their "full potential of being a competent student, an empowered employee or an engaged citizen" (Meyers et al., 2013, p. 355). For that, they need to break away from the mundane and the typical in order to reflect on a more distanced, thoughtful, perspective of technology.

Pangrazio (2016) referred to this kind of reflection as "transcendental critique" and recommended it as an ideal way to achieve critical digital literacy. Fortunately, this specific pedagogical objective is also particularly suited to activities that break students away from, rather than integrate, the ways that they already use digital tools and media (which is where privacy issues most tend to arise). Pangrazio (2016) offers three main approaches to engaging students in transcendental critique: 1) visualization, 2) critical self-reflection, and 3) interpretation and re-articulation of digital concepts. I add a fourth category to Pangrazio's list: 4) digital artifact analysis. In my class, I address each of these categories through the implementation of a weekly "Online Activity Journal" that requires students to complete, and then reflect on, an activity in the online world (see Appendix A for assignment examples and instructions). None of these assignments require students to engage with digital media in invasive ways, and they are intentionally constructed with flexibility so as to maintain the integrity of students' privacy boundaries and media use preferences. I provide more detail on how this is accomplished in the following sections.

Activity

Visualization

Pangrazio (2016) suggests that data visualization can be used to "to decontextualise or defamiliarise digital texts, tools and practices with the goal of suspending or interrupting commonly held assumptions and views" (p. 171). Conveniently, there are several open data visualization tools that can be explored without requiring a log-in or profile; I use Google Trends (trends.google.com), the Wayback Machine (archive.org), and Wikipedia statistics (Wikipedia.org) in three separate weekly Online Activity Journals (see “Track a Trend,” “The WayBack Machine,” and “Wikipedia” in Appendix A).

When I have students explore these tools, I give them the website URL along with a set of instructions to follow. They then answer a series of questions that guide them through a summary of their experience, with a particular focus on observations that align with the concepts for that week. For example, when exploring the Wikipedia statistics, I ask students, “Are there any users who appear to edit this page on a regular basis?” This directly addresses a class concept about the inequality of contributions that can occur in the “open-source” model of informal, online, group collaboration. A final requirement for these assignments is that students directly apply at least two concepts from the week’s readings to their observations.

Critical Self-Reflection

Having students reflect on the digital media practices they already engage in “becomes a way in which the individual can move between the personal and the ideological while exploring and analysing concepts that are embedded in digital technologies and networks” (Pangrazio, 2016, pp. 171-2). It also allows instructors to guide students toward new understandings without requiring them to engage in any additional digital media uses beyond what they are already doing for the purposes of the class. Three Online Activity Journals in which I use this approach require students to reflect on: 1) the last medium they used before starting their assignment, as a way of guiding them through concepts related to media use protocols and media convergence (“Communication Protocols” in Appendix A), 2) their own “filter bubble,” by comparing a frequented website across devices or with a cooperating friend’s device/log-in (“The Filter Bubble” in Appendix A), and 3) their own personal data found on Google and public records aggregators like peekyou.com and spokeo.com (an extended and more private version of the in-class activity I opened this essay with, see “Your Data” in Appendix A).

In the past, I have had students report their journal reflections using either individual assignment submissions – for my eyes only – or via online student discussions, which all of their classmates see and may respond to. There are benefits to both formats, but, either way, students are in control of the level of personal detail that they reveal, and they are fully aware of the audience with whom they are communicating. Still, if one were to vary the format by week, it is these three weeks in which the reflections are most personal, thus the individual submissions may be more preferable.

Interpretation and Re-Articulation of Digital Concepts

In her third and final recommendation, Pangrazio (2016) suggests examining the rhetoric typically ascribed to concepts in digital media studies in order to call into question some of the more positive terms associated with its use. She explains that the mostly positive connotations "conceal some of the more complex and confronting issues of digital media use" (p. 172).

While this objective could be directly addressed through class discussions focused on the terms themselves, I have found evaluative comparisons as particularly useful in guiding students to this realization experientially. For example, during the week in which we cover amateur media, I have students find an example of an amateur-produced remix and evaluate its quality on a variety of dimensions (see "Evaluate a Remix" in Appendix A). After they first consider its artistic and aesthetic aspects, they are then asked to consider ethical dimensions of authorship, ownership, and copyright – the downside of "participatory" culture. In another week, students compare citizen coverage of a chosen news story to that of a professional news organization as a way of exploring both the good and the bad outcomes of democratized news production (see "News Item Comparison" in Appendix A). In a third example, students engage with a large language model artificial intelligence platform of their choosing to ask it advice, probe it on a topic on which they are expert, and make some creative contributions, all of which they evaluate and compare with their experiences of humans doing the same (see "AI Chatbots" in Appendix A). These comparative/evaluative weeks are especially conducive to the online class discussion format, as students conduct a second level of comparison with their classmates' chosen examples/topics, collaboratively generating further insights into these concepts.

Digital Artifact Analysis

In my experience, digital artifact analysis seems an appropriate fourth approach for achieving Pangrazio's (2016) "transcendental critique." This type of analysis involves guiding students through an exploration of the social, cultural, or political processes evidenced or embedded in chosen digital objects of study. For example, I have a weekly Online Activity Journal in which students evaluate a selected online community for collective intelligence ("Investigate a Group or

Community" in Appendix A), another looking at social network processes in a public group from a city of their choosing on Meetup.com (another site which does not require a sign-in to browse, see "Meetup.com" in Appendix A), and a third assessing the transmedia marketing strategies found via the website of a chosen brand ("Investigate a Brand in Appendix A).

Keeping assignment options open is another way to give students control over what they choose to share. For example, for the online community evaluation, students are not required to discuss a group for which they are a member, but that is certainly one possibility they can choose. They are not instructed to have a profile on a particular group-forming site like Facebook or Reddit in order to do the assignment, but both of these are options they may employ. Once again, the activities are designed such that it is left entirely up to the student how personal they want to get with the choices they make in response to my instructions and questions.

Assessment

In sum, having students use digital media for the purpose of class assignments and activities without violating their privacy and preference boundaries is entirely possible, with a bit of creativity and flexibility. In fact, student learning objectives within the realm of critical digital literacy are particularly conducive to this kind of effort. The Online Activity Journal is not the only assignment format that can accomplish this goal, but it does reveal some pedagogical strategies that can assist in such an endeavor: using open tools that allow exploration without a log-in; assigning self-reflection of pre-existing uses; and building in modality and topic choices. Specifically, an assignment structure that gives students control over the level of personal information they are willing to share and the tools they choose to employ can inspire conceptual understanding without forcing students cross their own personal boundaries. Further, a mixed submission process may be preferable, in which those activities that may get more personal could be submitted to the instructor only, and those that would benefit from broader comparisons may be submitted as a class discussion. Finally, as always with digital media assignments, the instructions dealing with a specific website or app will need to be revisited each term to ensure that they still accurately guide students through the proper pathways to find what they need, but also to ensure that the sites are still open and accessible without a log-in. For instance, for the "Track a Trend" activity (see Appendix A), I used to have all students search the term on Twitter. When the platform changed to require a log-in for search, however, I had to expand it to allow students to search the feed of a social media site of their choosing, so they would not feel pressured to sign up for a specific one. In general, these strategies may be utilized in a variety of situations, activities, and exercises that one may wish to employ in their classes as ways of engaging students in the digital world, without approaching the ethically murky waters of incorporating the obligatory use of specific, publicly-accessible digital platforms.

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Appendix A

Online Activity Journals

Note: All Online Activity Journals end with the following instruction: "Conclude with a summary paragraph, making 2-3 connections to the week's readings and concepts and explaining how they applied to this activity. Describe any other thoughts you had about this assignment, including any struggles you might have had with this activity or making connections to class readings."

Communication Protocols

Post a response addressing the following questions:

1. Before you logged into Moodle to do this assignment today, what was the last medium you used or interacted with (interactive or otherwise)? What was your purpose and goal for using this medium?
2. What are some of the communication protocols associated with this medium? In other words: How did you gain access to it? What are the typical uses of this medium? What are some norms or characteristics that you have come to expect from it?
3. Did this medium exist before the rise of computers and the internet in the 1990s, or is it a type of "new" / interactive media?
4. What kind of content did you access there? Did you consume (read / watch / listen) or produce (write / post / submit) it? Would you characterize it as personal or public? Was it professional or amateur?
5. Where do you think it would fall in the media convergence ecosystem graphic*? Did it move back and forth between categories as you used it?

* available from author upon request

The WayBack Machine

In this activity, we will be using the "Wayback Machine" found at https://web.archive.org. Choose 2 websites that you visit on a regular basis (except social media sites). One at a time, put them into the textbox next to where it says "Wayback Machine," and click "BROWSE HISTORY." For each one, look at the bar graph at the top of the page, which lists the years and the number of times this website was archived. Click on the first year that has a bar in it, and then click earliest date highlighted in blue on the calendar. This will allow you to see what this website looked like at that point in time (if there is nothing or very little on the page on that first date, keep clicking later dates until some content appears on the page). Try clicking on any links to navigate through the archived site (these may or may not work, depending on how well the site was archived). Then use the bar graph at the top of the page to click forward through the years, and choose other dates at random to observe the site's evolution over time, up until it begins to look like the site as you know it today. Answer the questions below for each of the sites:

1. What was the earliest date/year this site was archived with content?
2. Describe how the site looked in the beginning, compared to how it looks today. What other notable design changes did you see as you looked through the years? Note the similarities and differences.
3. In what ways has the content or offerings of the website changed? What did they offer their audience through their website in the beginning, compared to what they offer now? Note the similarities and differences.
4. What, if anything, did they appear to have learned throughout the years about how to best use a website to reach or interact with their audience?
5. What other notable or interesting things did you notice about this website's evolution over time?

Investigate a Group or Community

Find an active online community (i.e. one that has at least a hundred members and has had several posts within the last 24 hours) about a topic of interest to you. You can look for a group on a social networking site like Facebook, a subreddit on Reddit, a popular list or hashtag on Twitter or Instagram, or just try googling "online community" with a topic of your choice to see if you can find one. If you already belong to such a community, you may discuss that one. Join the community and read through the archives to observe what goes on there.

Address the following questions:

1. What is the main topic of the community?
2. What social tools and features does the community offer?
3. Are you able to get a sense of how the community is organized (i.e. different topic sections, different types of activities that go on there)?
4. What is the most active section or feature of the site?
5. Describe the general tone and nature of the community (i.e. are its members friendly and supportive, or sarcastic and combative? Do the comments generally have a lighthearted or serious tone? Etc.)
6. Describe any community norms that are evidenced, either through the features of the site itself or the activity you observe there (i.e. there

might be a labeling system in place for member level activity, or you might notice new members introducing themselves in a dedicated “introductions” section).

7. Describe one example where you saw knowledge-sharing taking place between members.

Meetup.com

Imagine you’re a journalist at a newspaper in a large city (you pick the city) and your editor asks you to write a local story about one of the following topics (choose ONE):

- what independent musicians/bands from the area are up and coming
- how singles find one another in the local dating scene
- growing activist networks in the city
- local charities and what they are doing for their community
- how people achieve healthy lifestyles living in the city
- up-and-coming fashion trends

To begin research on your topic of interest, go to https://www.meetup.com/find/groups/. Put a search term or phrase that is relevant to your chosen topic in the “Search for anything” box, and the city of your choice in the box next to it (it may already be populated with your current location, but feel free to change it).

Try to find a group that is public, relevant to your topic, and has at least 25 members. Spend some time becoming familiar with both group’s meetup site by clicking through the various tabs, reading reviews, comments and posts, looking at events and pictures, etc. Note the following:

1. How long has this group existed (see “Founded on” in the left sidebar)?
2. How many members does it have?
3. How often do they meet and for what purpose(s)?
4. What information have you already learned that might be useful for your article (i.e can you get a sense of who they are, their opinions, or what they do)?
5. If you “met up” with this group at their next event, what questions would you plan to ask of the members?
6. Do you think this is a good place to begin your research for this article? Why or why not?

Evaluate a Remix

On YouTube or another video-sharing site, find an example of an amateur-produced re-mix, mash-up, parody, cover or other form that uses content from a professional media source and reinterprets it in a new way (known as media appropriation). Include a link to the video and briefly describe both it and the original content it appropriated.

Write up a detailed response giving your personal reaction to this video. This response should include answers to the following questions:

1. How would you evaluate this video's quality? Aspects of the video you may want to consider can include its production value and entertainment value.
2. What can you find out about why this video was created and by whom? What do you think the goal or purpose of the video was?
3. Would you say this video was successful or unsuccessful? Explain how you are interpreting successful/unsuccessful in your response.
4. Would it have been possible to create or share this video without access to interactive media? How do you think that might have been accomplished?
5. Consider for a moment how the creators of the original, professional content that was used might feel. Do you think they should be upset that their content was appropriated? Why or why not?
6. Do you think it was ethical for the producers of this remix to appropriate the original content and share it in their own video online? Why or why not?

News Item Comparison

Choose a current event or recent news story that is of interest to you (if you are having trouble coming up with one, see the top stories listed at https://www.allsides.com/). Search the topic on YouTube to find a video from a well-known, professional news outlet covering the story (look for names you recognize and the grey checkmark verifying a professional outlet as the source). Then find an amateur video covering the same issue or event from YouTube or another platform (e.g. TikTok, Rumble) - it does not have to include actual footage, they can just be talking about it. (On Youtube, it may be easier to find these if you click on "Filter" and choose the "Creative Commons" option under "Features." Look for less professional sounding usernames unlikely to have the grey checkmark). When you have found two reports, include the URLs to both and compare and contrast them, addressing the following:

1. Summarize the main point / perspective expressed in each.
2. Note and describe any similarities (in ideas, information, or presentation) between them.

3. Note and describe any differences (in ideas, information, or presentation) between them.
4. Place each report into one of the following categories (and explain why you categorized it that way):
   - News
   - Opinion
   - Entertainment
   - Other?
5. Explain which report you liked better and why.

Wikipedia

Go onto Wikipedia and find an article about a topic of interest to you. Note the title of the article you chose in your response. Click the "View history" tab – this lists the revisions made to the page. If you are not familiar with how to read/understand this list, see the Wikipedia help article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Help:Page_history. Take a few minutes to look at the list and become familiar with the features, and click on the "Revision History Statistics" link to learn more about the history of this page. Note the following:

1. How recently was the last edit made?
2. About how often are edits made to this article?
3. Are there any users who appear to edit this page on a regular basis? (Note their usernames or, if anonymous, their IP addresses.
4. Anything else you discovered or of note?

Go back to the article and click on the "Talk" tab on the left – this is a wiki version of a discussion board, where users discuss what is in the article. (If there is nothing there, it may have been recently archived. Click the number 1 next to "Archives" to see what the talk page most recently looked like). Read through this page and write down the following:

1. What types of things are being discussed? The topic, the article, both? Something else?
2. Is there evidence of knowledge sharing (i.e. are there debates going on, are people presenting diverse perspectives or viewpoints)? If so, describe it.
3. What have you learned about how knowledge is produced, and disseminated, through Wikipedia? How is this different than a professionally produced encyclopedia?
4. What do you think about the fact that people are doing all of this work for free, without getting paid?

Investigate a Brand

Go to the official website of one of your favorite “brands” (i.e. a product, program, film, sports team, franchise, band, etc.). Spend some time looking through the site to get a sense of their brand and how they reach out to the consumer. Write a response in which you include the URL of the website and describe how they address the following:

- Multiple “entry-points” into their brand through other portals (Facebook, Twitter, smartphone apps, etc.)
- “Dynamic” content (blogs, newsletters, email updates, anything that is updated with new information regularly)
- “On-demand” content (streaming video clips, downloads, etc.)
- Interactive content (games, personalization, contests, anything that allows the consumer to further interact with the product)
- Participatory content (forums, comments, polls, ratings, anything that allows the consumer to discuss the brand or give feedback)
- Other types of media / content that you find interesting or applicable

Now that you have reviewed these offerings, take a few minutes to assess them from your own perspective. In your opinion, how successful or unsuccessful are these efforts to incorporate new digital and social tools in engaging the consumer? On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate this brand on its use of interactive media? What do you think this says about the company’s attitude towards its relationship with its consumers?

Track a Trend

Go to https://trends.google.com/trends/trendingsearches/daily – this lists the top keywords or phrases that are being or have recently been searched on google over the past few days. Choose one that seems interesting to you and click on it to look at the related recent news articles. Can you get a sense of the story linked to this trend’s popularity? If so, summarize the story. If not, explain why it’s confusing.

Now click on the trend name again. This should bring you to a history of this keyword(s)’ trending - the default view is for the last year, so click the drop-down where it says “Past 7 days” and choose “2004-present” instead (2004 is as far back as it goes). Spend some time exploring this page and answer the following questions:

1. Has this keyword/phrase trended before? In other words, is there a history of peaks and valleys? Or is it a recent phenomenon, meaning the blue line only appears recently?

2. Click on the dropdown arrow next to where it says “United States” in the upper lefthand corner and choose “Worldwide.” Does this change the graph at all?
3. Then scroll down to the “Interest by region” section of the page. Explore the map a bit, and determine what countries, regions and/pr cities this search is most popular in. Why do you think that might be?
4. Scroll down to the “Related topics” and “Related queries.” Can you determine why this topic might be trending? Note anything else interesting that you learn.

Finally, paste the keyword(s) into the search at a social media site that you use (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit...). If you can, sort the results by most recent not most popular. Now consider the following questions:

1. What types of things are people are saying about this topic? Can you get a sense of the perspectives or opinions people have about it?
2. Approximately how often are they posting? Is there a hashtag that seems to be associated with this keyword?
3. Are people repeatedly linking to any websites or news articles? What are they?
4. Anything else interesting that you noticed?

Filter Bubble

On a computer or device you frequently use, go to a website/app that you use on a regular basis (if necessary, log in). It can be a social media site, a news website, an online community, etc. Navigate through the site a bit as you normally would, but this time pay particular attention to the dynamic content that is displayed to you (meaning that content that is regularly updated and always changing), as well as the “periphery” content (i.e. ads, sponsored links, recommendations or suggestions on the sidebar, etc.), and consider the following questions:

1. Does the content seem to be tailored in any way? If so, were there any common themes or trends that you noticed in the tailored content?
2. Does the “periphery” content seem in any way to be related to the main content on the page?
3. Does any of this content seem particularly tailored to your demographic (i.e. age, location, gender, etc.)?
4. Does it seem like any of this content might be in some way related to you personally - your specific interests, profile, or individual browsing or posting history?

5. Do you feel that the messages, themes and trends you noticed attempt to reflect something about who you are? If so, do you feel that it is an accurate reflection?

Now go to the same site/app with a different computer or device (perhaps a friend's or in a computer lab), or, if possible, log in with a different account.

1. Were there any significant differences in the dynamic or peripheral content? If so, what were they?
2. Why do you think there were, or were not, differences?
3. Did you find evidence of the filter bubble in your version of this experiment? If not, why do you think that might be? And if so, do you think that this is a good, a bad thing, or neither?

Your Data

Click through the various results you get as you conduct the following tasks, and take notes on what you discover.

1. Google your name. Are there results related to you? If not, try putting your name in quotes and/or adding your location to the search. What can you find?
2. Now Google your address (the one you have lived in longest, probably your home address). Click on the maps link that is provided, and then click on "Satellite" view. Zoom in to get the best view you can of your home. (Other options to play around with If available: click on the "3D"option and zoom in, or drag the little yellow man onto any nearby blue road for Streetview. Once in Streetview, you can drag to turn around and click on the date to see what this spot looked like at certain points in the past). Are you surprised at what you see? Why or why not?
3. Now go to www.peekyou.com. Try searching on your name, name and location, and usernames that you use. Did you get any results?
4. Next go to www.peoplefinders.com. Try your name under the name tab, email under the email tab, phone number under the phone tab, and address under the address tab. What kind of results did you get this time?
5. Finally, go to www.spokeo.com. Put in various data again to try and find yourself. What did you get?
6. What did you find out? Anything surprising or unexpected? Anything erroneous or incorrect?

7. What were the differences between the types of results you found with the different technologies (google, peekyou, and spokeo)?
8. Had you ever done any of these before?

For comparison, now do some or all of steps 1-5 for a friend or family member who you don't think would mind you looking them up. Answer the questions above for them as well. What, if anything, might you conclude from this comparison?

AI Chatbots

Using an Artificially Intelligent (AI) chat app such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Grok, or My AI (on Snapchat), engage in the following interactions:

1. Ask the AI chatbot to explain something about topic you have in-depth knowledge about, and hit the little arrow to send it. Read through its response. Post a few follow up questions to learn more and probe its accuracy, asking for more detail or clarification for instance. What was your question, and how accurate were the AI chatbot's responses, compared to what you know about this concept or topic? Did it get anything wrong? Did you learn anything new from it?
2. Provide a prompt for a creative piece - a story, a poem, a song, a joke, a comedy skit, a movie scene - about a topic of your choosing. You can be as specific or generic as you like. Try this a few different times, asking for different genres or styles each time. You can even specify the style of a famous individual if you want. What were your requests, and how were the responses similar or different each time?
3. Think of a personal dilemma you are currently struggling with (e.g. an argument with a roommate) or challenge you are facing (e.g. an upcoming job interview). Explain the situation to the chatbot and ask it what you should do. Feel free to post a few follow up questions if you wish. What did you ask the chatbot, and what did you think of its advice? Did it offer any insight you hadn't considered? Was any of it bad advice?
4. Most AI chatbots will not give you opinions, but you can ask an open-ended question about a controversial political or cultural issue, topic, or figure you are interested in understanding better. Ask a few follow up questions to probe its answers. You can even try asking leading questions with differing political biases about the same issue to see how the response differs. What did you ask it about and did you learn anything from it? Do you disagree with anything it said, or did it

change your mind about anything? Did you find it to be more biased in one direction or another, or was it relatively balanced?

5. Had you ever interacted with this AI chatbot or others like it before? What did you think? Did you feel like you were talking to another person, or did it feel more like a performance to you?
6. How could this be beneficial to you, in the future? How might it be problematic?

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Book Review

Paradox in Public Relations: A Contrarian Critique of Theory and Practice

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In my over 30 years of professional involvement with public relations as both a practitioner and then an academic, one thing that has stood out is the continual drive for public relations to "prove" itself as a meaningful contributing force to clients, society, and the people who work within the field. This has always struck me as slightly odd – that is, discourse about similar fields like marketing, advertising, and journalism has simply not hit such a chord of desperation. Relatedly, Kevin L. Stoker, a professor and director of the Hank Greenspun School of Journalism and Media Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, provides a significant insight: public relations' drive to assert its value operates within paradox. That is, there is always a contravening element to what public relations says it does. When it claims it helps build relationships between organizations and publics, it inherently fails to acknowledge that it 1) does not have control on how those stakeholders see the nature of such a claimed relationship, and 2) contradicts itself by excluding other audiences that may be meaningful. Together, these elements point to a paradox endemic to core claims that public relations makes about its worth, says Stoker. It is apparent that Stoker is pointing to public relations experiencing a disorientation of purpose that is too often unacknowledged.

Content and scope

In *Paradox in Public Relations*, Stoker works from within a wider frame of psychology-influenced perspectives (e.g., Watzlawick), organizational theorists (e.g., Hirschman), semantics scholars (e.g., Korzybski), and public sphere-related theorists (e.g., Dewey, and Kruckeberg and Starck) along with a sufficient dash of philosophical works (e.g., Kirkegaard, Royce) to provide a picture of this disorientation. Across seven chapters, Stoker provides clear descriptions of the paradoxes that public relations encounters. He says the paradoxes are clear when public relations claims that it operates in the public interest, builds relationships, pursues symmetrical dialog with stakeholder groups, helps foster client accountability, and displays loyalty to the client while also attempting to portray the client as integral to the communities in which the client operates. Stoker begins each chapter with clear linkages of public relations' claims to descriptions of applicable theories and then briskly, but cogently, moves into how these theories help illuminate the presence of paradox. By the end of each chapter, Stoker suggests ways that practitioners and scholars can reframe their thinking so that the field can learn from paradox and operate in a way that moves past potential disorientations.

The early-to-middle section of the book is particularly relevant and striking. Chapter 2's discussion of public interest is important because it calls out how public relations can look disingenuous when it claims that it operates in the public interest while also serving a paymaster. Granted, some critical scholars (e.g., L'Etang, Edwards) have made similar observations but the author moves beyond that dynamic to also discuss how the formulations of "publics" can be paradoxical in itself (e.g., who is "in" and who is "out" among the publics and how that immediately compromises acting in the public interest). Stoker, however, maintains that public relations should more widely acknowledge how the serving of power, while simultaneously claiming to serve the public interest, does not necessarily mean public relations is inevitably questionable. Instead, with more acknowledgment and transparency of this dynamic, he says, public relations can be "reframed as a series of morally worthy activities on behalf of private interests that welcome outside scrutiny and public judgment" (Stoker, 2020, p. 49). While this is a worthy argument, one can justifiably question if such a disclosure framework meets the rigor of this chapter (and the book); simply being transparent about one's actions does not necessarily address the *quality* of those actions. Moreover, unscrupulous actors can use transparency to attempt to blunt criticism.

Further into the middle section, Stoker offers particularly compelling observations in Chapter 4. He points to the paradoxes surrounding the field's long-standing claims about promoting symmetrical communication and dialog, but then also mentions that public relations' emphasis on these two items appears to be waning. That is a problematic claim, and I would have preferred if he had analyzed this as a persistent problem that is likely to trouble public relations theory and practice for at least the immediate future. For one, public relations textbooks still maintain that two-way symmetrical communication is a gold standard (Frieberg, 2021; Theaker, 2016) and scholars still study symmetry and dialog without necessarily relying on those terms. For example, it is important to note a recent uptick in discussing public relations and the pursuit of discourse and dialog as part of a "circulatory system" (Edwards, 2018), and some scholars are essentially re-casting hoary notions of symmetry into the moments that are part of the circuit of culture (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Curtin, 2016). These are more sophisticated understandings that track with Stoker's observations that public relations has too long struggled with trying to replicate aspects of interpersonal communication (something he critiques in Chapter 3's biting analysis of organizational public relations, or OPR, scholarship). Stoker (2020) rightly points out the paradox here – one does not say to another in most interpersonal conversations, here, I have some strategic points to get across to you and then want to get feedback and, if necessary, make adjustments. This is not dialog in the interpersonal realm and, he maintains, it is less so within an institutional communication context. Communication, he says, optimally is not about public relations' continual bent for harmony in the pursuit of reaching a goal. Instead, he maintains, it is about recognizing the differences among people and working to reconcile them as best as one can.

This last point is particularly apt. It is increasingly evident in the U.S. and around the world that public discourse, even in democratic societies, is suffering from individuals, movements, and organizations that simply (and forcefully) assert lies or fantasy as reality, believing that enough of the citizenry will simply accept those forceful assertions (Foust & St. John, 2022). Equally troubling, if one does not accept such fact-less assertions, then one may be increasingly inclined to remove oneself from discussion. In contrast, over 10 years ago psychology professor Jonathan Haidt observed that we can transcend our own self-focus by becoming "simply a part of the whole" (2012, p. 317). Stoker's book seems to parallel this observation; he recommends that public relations can serve society better by abandoning the self-focus revealed by attempting to control the parameters of relating. Instead, he says, public relations can act as an interpretive force in society, "adopting an 'existential watchfulness' that nurtures and seeks out community" (Stoker, 2020, p. 157). Although not expressly addressed by Stoker, one thing is clear through his prescription: this kind of vigilance offered by public relations could be a way to address the increasing polarization in advanced democracies.

Audience

Students studying public relations at an undergraduate level will likely find this work to be too abstract. This book, however, would greatly expand graduate students' understanding of public relations, widening their view beyond critiques of the performative nature of public relations (e.g., greenwashing and front groups) to the broader topic of how public relations faces epistemic challenges about itself and the societies in which it operates. Additionally, readers with only a tangential understanding of public relations – and possibly even some practitioners who "don't do strategy" (yes, I heard that phrase too often in my professional career) – will likely also find this book too esoteric. In contrast, public relations scholars and academics from other cross-cutting fields (e.g., sociology, journalism, and political communication) will likely find this a valuable, thought-provoking addition to their libraries.

Critique and Conclusion

Like humans, no books are perfect. At times, this book offers quotes from scholarly literature and mainstream news sources without the use of "said" in conjunction with the quote, nor an in-text citation. The index is a bit underwhelming, making it difficult to look up where Stoker highlights key terms as he aligns them with other observations across the chapters (e.g., "reconciliation" and "relating" are important to this book but neither are found in the index).

Lastly, one of the challenges of this kind of vital book is the specter of being overtaken by events. For example, Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) has emerged over the last several years as an important update to Corporate Social Responsibility, especially in the aftermath of the 2020 protests of George Floyd's murder. However, there are no references to CSA here. Instead, there is a wider discussion of accountability in Chapter 5. Even then, that chapter appears severely dated as it offers insights from practitioners that are from over 12 years ago.

Nevertheless, in an era where public relations' bent for harmony is significantly challenged by belligerent publics who engage in fact less assertions, this book, while slightly overtaken by this dynamic, asks a crucial question: what does public relations see itself as truly offering society? Stoker offers some answers, but the field will find it challenging to get past its own denial of paradoxes to facilitate constructive relationships amidst a society increasingly not interested in dialog.

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Book Review

The Illustrated Guide to the Content Analysis Research Project

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The Illustrated Guide to the Content Analysis Research Project introduces novice communication researchers to the fundamentals of social scientific research, with quantitative content analysis as the primary research method discussed, in a playful, approachable tone. Swann clearly demonstrates the value of research within the communication field and for communication students' career development. The textbook meets undergraduate students where they are, recognizing the apprehension that students bring with them to their first research methods course and providing them with the resources and support necessary to help them develop a research mindset. The book also provides examples from peer-reviewed content analysis studies to demonstrate what type of information belongs in each section of a research paper and how published authors present their research.

Structure & Organization

The guide contains 13 chapters, ranging from getting started to picking your research topic, all the way through writing the different sections of a research paper, ending with a discussion of the various avenues available for students to share their research beyond the classroom.

Swann uses chapters one through five to encourage the reader to begin to appreciate the value in seeing themself as a researcher, provide them with the foundations of social scientific research methods, and guide them through how to choose a research topic. This first part of the textbook defines key elements (such as conceptualization, operationalization, research questions, hypotheses, variables, reliability, and validity), distinguishes qualitative from quantitative research methods, reviews critical ethical considerations for research, and provides guidance on how to decide what their study should investigate. Wherever appropriate, the specific ways in which these topics directly relate to content analysis are highlighted, such as intercoder reliability, how qualitative content analysis differs from quantitative content analysis, the ethical questions related to training coders or conducting an analysis of public behavior online, and examples of research topics appropriate for content analysis based on a reader's passions and career goals.

The remaining chapters are devoted to writing and formatting a content analysis research paper and sharing research beyond a course assignment: literature review (chapter six), hypothesis/research question (chapter seven), method (chapter eight), results (chapter nine), discussion and conclusion (chapter 10), the abstract (chapter 11), formatting, references, and appendices (chapter 12), and sharing your research (chapter 13). Chapters six through 11 begin with an explanation of what type of information belongs in each of the specific sections of a research paper. Guidance on developing and organizing this content is provided, as are excerpts from published, academic research articles to provide readers with high-quality examples of how others have presented their own quantitative content analysis projects. The final chapter overviews the different avenues for sharing research, including oral and poster presentations, research conference presentations, and academic and industry publications, concluding with advice for those interested in gaining more research experience and exploring research as a career.

From beginning to end, this book assumes zero-to-limited experience with designing, conducting, or writing about research. Swann (2021) states, "If you have never conducted academic research, this guide is for you," (p. 2). I completely agree; no prior experience with social scientific research methods is necessary, and much of the front half of the guide would likely feel redundant if assigned in addition to another research methods textbook's chapters on comparable topics. Swann's enthusiasm for training the new generation of communication researchers is evident, and the use of colorful illustrations throughout the book help to bring life to material that students tend to report having negative attitudes towards (Earley, 2014). Due to the guide's focus on one specific research method, this book would be most suitable as a supplemental text for undergraduate, communication research methods courses. For degree programs that feature primary research-driven senior thesis projects, this could be an invaluable resource for a student planning to complete a quantitative content analysis.

Contributions to Public Relations Education

As the first step in the four-stage processes that guide campaign development, research is critical to the success of public relations work. As such, public relations programs are expected to include research as a primary component in their curriculum to apply for Certification in Education for Public Relations, the global standard in public relations education (Public Relations Society of America, 2022). While quantitative content analysis is only one of many research methods to which public relations undergraduate students should be introduced, it is a common research method utilized within both the academic study of public relations and within the industry itself. Swann's text demonstrates the value of quantitative content analysis across communication sub-disciplines, referencing public relations only on occasion. That said, instructors of courses focused on research methods for public relations specifically could provide additional, PR-relevant examples.

Strengths & Weaknesses

Strength: Tone

The guide is written clearly, concisely, and with zeal. Swann's positive energy and commitment to preparing the next generation of communication scholars and practitioners is contagious. Her tone is conversational and approachable, encouraging the reader's confidence while developing their own identity as a researcher. The book concludes with a “Let me hear from you” section, which welcomes new researchers to share their research experiences, as well as faculty to share relevant activities and resources. Additionally, each chapter ends with a brief “Dos and Don’ts section” to summarize the key takeaways succinctly for the reader, as well as class exercises that instructors could adopt or adapt for their classes.

Strength: Relevance Beyond Content Analysis

The title of the guide is a bit misleading: much of the textbook’s content is relevant to social scientific research methods broadly, not simply for content analysis work. While the examples throughout the guide are specific to quantitative content analysis, Swann’s plain language-breakdown of the fundamental components and considerations related to writing research papers feature helpful guidance for students embarking on their first research projects regardless of method. In particular, chapters two and six stand out to me. Chapter two defines research vocabulary, clarifies how the scientific method produces trustworthy results, and introduces the main parts of an academic research paper. Chapter six walks the reader through everything they will need to know when writing their first literature review. I deeply appreciate the recommendation of college library resources and staff, as well as all the tips for conducting an effective literature search.

Strength: Cost

When selecting required and recommended texts for courses, cost is one of many factors that faculty should consider. Textbook prices have risen by 812% over the past 35+ years, and between 2006 and 2017, textbook costs increased at a rate four times faster than the rate of inflation (Team iCEV, 2017). The guide comes in three format options (hard cover, paperback, and eBook). Two of these three options cost less than $45, with the eBook as the most affordable at $38.65.

Neutral: Illustrations

In my review of the guide, the illustrations contributed to the approachable, playful tone of the book more often than serving as visualizations of key concepts or providing a visual guide to the steps of conducting a content analysis. Beyond bringing color and energy to the text, the value of any given illustration in helping to visually communicate the material is limited. I was struck by how helpful the illustration presenting the difference between summarizing and synthesizing sources (in chapter 6) was, in part, because of how easily the visual demonstrates an issue that many of my students have struggled to understand over the years, but also because few other illustrations in the book were as effective.

Weakness: Level of Detail

Above, I discussed the relevance of this guide beyond content analysis work as a primary strength. The other side of that coin is that as a substantial portion of the guide's content focuses on social scientific research method fundamentals and research paper writing, the level of detail specific to content analysis itself is lacking. Based on the guide's title, I anticipated a step-by-step guide for the work of developing coding categories and codebooks, determining appropriate sampling strategy and sample size, training coders, evaluating intercoder reliability, selecting appropriate statistical tests, and interpreting the results with illustrations that provide visual aids and examples. However, the steps of a quantitative content analysis are presented in less detail than anticipated, nested within chapters focused on the various subsections of research papers. The examples provided are all content analyses, which is unique and very helpful to relating the content of the chapter back to the method of focus; however, the book reads more as a guide to developing a research study and writing the research paper with a focus on content analysis, as opposed to a guide to developing and carrying out a content analysis project.

Conclusion

In summary, the guide has an informal, approachable tone that welcomes readers to the world of communication research and encourages them to get comfortable and stay a while. Swann's language and tone are clear and reassuring. While I hesitate to suggest the guide would be appropriate as the only required text, it could easily be used as the primary text for an undergraduate communication research methods course if supplemented by materials that provide greater detail on the other key communication research methods.

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