

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

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 through 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!