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Public Relations Education
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Table of Contents

Journal of Public Relations Education
2025, Vol. 11, No. 3, 6-7

Letter from the Editor

Thank you for engaging with the Journal of Public Relations Education (JPRE) and with this final issue of 2025 (11-3). In this issue, once again, we showcase the vibrancy, innovation, and care that public relations educators bring to their classrooms and curricula. The manuscripts collected here reflect a shared commitment to preparing students for a profession that is increasingly data-driven, AI-mediated, and equity-focused, while remaining grounded in ethical practice and human-centered communication.

This issue features pedagogical work that helps students navigate emerging technologies with critical insight and practical skill. One teaching brief immerses undergraduates in a high-pressure simulation of an AI-triggered crisis, asking them to apply crisis communication theories in real time, collaborate across stakeholder roles, and reflect on the ethical use of generative AI in organizational communication. Another contribution uses AI-generated, arts-based audience personas to deepen students' audience analysis, integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion principles so that students practice ethical prompt design, realistic representation of identities, and research-informed segmentation for strategic campaigns.

Alongside these technology-focused innovations, this issue also advances the conversation about quantitative literacy in public relations. One study introduces the construct of "closeness to numbers," illuminating how practical, civic, and cultural numeracies can be nurtured over time, through concrete contexts, supportive learning communities, and intentional efforts to counter math anxiety and negative self-talk. Together, these pieces underscore that preparing students for contemporary practice means helping them both interpret data and understand the human stories, identities, and power structures that those data represent.

Across the manuscripts in 11-3, several themes emerge: the value of experiential learning, the importance of safe and inclusive learning environments, and the need to integrate data, technology, and IDEA throughout the curriculum rather than confining them to isolated modules or single courses. The authors in this issue offer concrete models, simulation designs, assignment structures, and conceptual frameworks that colleagues can adapt to their own institutional contexts and student populations.

JPRE continues to depend on an army of volunteers, comprising a vibrant community of reviewers, authors, and readers who share a vision of public relations education that is evidence-based, ethically grounded, globally engaged, and, dare I even say it… fun! Gratitude is extended to the authors, reviewers, and production team whose volunteer labor and scholarly generosity make this issue possible, and to the educators who will carry these ideas into their classrooms and programs. We appreciate your support, encouragement, love, and trust in our humble journal.

Adrienne A. Wallace
Editor-in-Chief

Journal of Public Relations Education
2025, Vol. 11, No. 3, 13-45

Addressing the Phrase, "I'm in PR because I hate math:" Role of Experiential Factors in Developing Closeness to Numbers through Practical, Civic, and Cultural Numeracies

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ABSTRACT

Using theoretical frameworks of psychological distance and science literacy, this study introduces the construct of "closeness to numbers" conceptualized as: (i) practical numeracy – an understanding of how to use numbers, (ii) civic numeracy – a sense of comfort and confidence in discussing numerical data, and (iii) cultural numeracy – an appreciation for numerical data in the field. Using semi-structured in-depth interviews with public relations/ communication students (n=15) and professionals (n=20), this study found that practical numeracy can be developed even if some struggled with it early on, civic numeracy nurtured at home and school can become integral at work, and cultural numeracy can be nurtured even if one is struggling with other numeracies. Experiential factors mattered significantly in developing closeness. Use of concrete contexts, establishing a supportive community, and inoculating against number trauma and negative self-talk contributed to building closeness to numbers.

Keywords: data literacy, analytics, research, relationship to numbers

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Many who choose public relations/communication (PR/Comm) do so because they are drawn to communication, creativity, or writing (Bowen, 2003; Plowman et al., 2022), but not because they love numbers. Some even say, "I deal in words, not numbers," "I'm a writer, not an accountant," or "I went into [communication] because I hate numbers," but there is a benefit from learning the "language of numbers" (Jaye, 2016). Data literacy allows us to demonstrate the value of PR/Comm and contribute to the strategic management function of a company (Grunig, 2006). Many practitioners (Adams & Lee, 2021; O'Neil et al., 2023) and institutions such as the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation (AMEC, 2022), Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE, 2022), and the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (Global Body of Knowledge [GBOK], Manley & Valin, 2017) note a proficiency in measurement, evaluation, and business/finances as a necessary skill for practitioners.

This study explores how PR/Comm students/professionals can nurture a "closeness to numbers," which is a new construct informed by psychological distance (Krielkamp, 1970; Trope & Liberman, 2010) and science literacy (Shen, 1975). The goal of this study is not just to identify tactics that will address anxiety, frustration, or disinterest in working with numbers for a single task but to inspire a lasting connection.

PR and Its Relationship to Numbers

Media often depict PR/Comm professionals as living glamorous lives focused on event planning, publicity, or damage control, portraying the profession as centered on implementing tactics with little substance, often to build/repair an image by concealing/altering the truth (Spicer, 2009; Yoon & Black, 2011). These portrayals affect student perceptions, and it is not until they begin coursework/internships that they realize PR involves data-driven strategic planning (Bowen, 2003).

The Barcelona Principles 3.0 (AMEC, 2022), the CPRE report (2023), and the GBOK (Manley & Valin, 2017) stated the ability to measure and evaluate using metrics, translate research to insights, and "visually and persuasively tell the data's story" (CPRE, 2023, p. 66) as crucial to our profession. Thus, nurturing a closeness to numbers would aid in developing students/practitioners who can intentionally, ethically, and meaningfully (principle 7) use all types of data (principle 4) to set measurable goals (principle 1) and assess necessary outcomes (principles 2, 3, 6), demonstrating the value of the field (AMEC, 2022).

The Construct: Closeness to Numbers

"Closeness to numbers" was inspired by the theoretical framework of psychological distance (Krielkamp, 1970; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Psychological distance is how close or far one feels from an object, person, or experience (Kreilkamp, 1984; Trope & Liberman, 2010). Lack of activity/commitment can create a sense of distance and feelings of appreciation can foster closeness (Krielkamp, 1970; Kreilkamp, 1984). Mere presence doesn't equate closeness, and closeness doesn't always require physical presence (Kreilkamp, 1984). Closeness to numbers does not simply mean having numbers in one's curriculum/practice, nor does it suggest being adept at numbers.

This study uses Shen's (1975) three forms of science literacy to conceptualize closeness to numbers. While Shen aimed for a public understanding of science – encouraging engagement without needing direct involvement with science – this study aims to equip PR/Comm students and professionals to work directly with numbers by fostering closeness to them. Thus, Shen's framework here is adapted, rather than directly applied.

The first form is practical science literacy, which Shen (1975) describes as "the possession of the type of scientific and technical know-how that can be immediately put to use to help improve living standards"

(p. 265). Building on this, I propose practical numeracy as a dimension of closeness to numbers, which involves possessing the technical knowledge and skills to use numbers in our field – for formative research, analytics, etc. The second form is civic science literacy, intended to "enable the citizen to become more aware of science and science-related issues… [to] participate more fully in the democratic processes of an increasingly technological society" (p. 266). He adds that someone with this form of literacy is "stimulated, rather than confused" (p. 266) by it and emphasizes the need to "convince [them] that [they have] no reason to shy away from it" (p. 267). Following this, I propose civic numeracy as the comfort and confidence in discussing numerical data. Like civic literacy, this involves being stimulated rather than intimidated by numbers and staying engaged by asking questions or having conversations even when concepts seem confusing/complex. Just as Shen stresses the importance to communicate clear, jargon-free information to sustain public engagement with science and policy, civic numeracy relies on accessible content and opportunities to ensure continued engagement with numbers. Finally, the third form is cultural science literacy, which "is motivated by a desire to know something about science as a major human achievement; it is to science what music appreciation is to music" (Shen, 1975, p. 267). He argues that appreciating science does not require knowing technical details and suggests that claiming otherwise "reveals the arrogance of science in our century" (p. 268). Drawing from this, I propose cultural numeracy as the appreciation of numerical data in our field, which can be nurtured regardless of one's practical/civic numeracies.

Closeness to numbers captures the concept of building efficacy, i.e., believing one can work with numbers (Bandura, 1997), but also involves fostering a desire to continue learning, communicating, and engaging with numbers. Those who feel close to numbers are open to the uncertainty and discomfort of not knowing everything immediately and remain interested in solving numerical problems.

Factors Affecting Closeness to Numbers

As social cognitive theory [SCT] explains, an individual's ability to learn is influenced by the "triadic reciprocal causation" between one's personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 2001). SCT would dictate that where one grew up, how numbers were introduced or discussed, and how one reflects on their own experiences can shape their closeness to numbers. While the research shared below does not explicitly apply SCT, it shows the potential influence these factors have on closeness to numbers.

Spatial Factors

Children growing up in rural or low-income areas often struggle with math due to limited access to educational resources (Magnuson et al., 2004; Miller & Votruba-Drzal, 2013). The extreme stress of such environments can negatively impact a child's ability to absorb information (Evans, 2004), making learning numbers feel unattainable, hindering their ability to nurture closeness with numbers. Thus, the physical environment a student would have inhabited is likely to shape their closeness to numbers in college.

Social Factors

Children with parents or family members in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) fields, who value math for future employment, are more likely to perform well in math (Anaya et al., 2021). Teachers, who are also part of a student's social network, impact students' comfort and efficacy in studying math (Beilock et al., 2010; Schaeffer et al., 2021). Peers also influence one's relationship to math (Kim et al., 2023). Thus, an individual's social network of family, teachers, and peers is likely to shape their closeness to numbers in college and at work.

Experiential Factors

How one internalizes their experiences with numbers matters. Evidence suggests that math anxiety and math ability/performance are connected (Young et al., 2012). A factor in overcoming this obstacle is

a student's self-talk i.e., how they interpret and narrate their experiences with math (Meece et al., 1990; Ramirez et al., 2018). If a student has a low self-concept, engages in negative self-talk, and has poor self-regulation, they're more likely to develop math anxiety (Ahmed et al., 2012; Jain & Dowson, 2009). The internal narrative a student/professional maintains becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ramirez et al., 2018), affecting how they view their past and future math experiences (Sherman & Cohen, 2006). The internal negative narrative seems to grow stronger when students feel like they have little control over their learning or feel like imposters (Tovey et al., 2022) which affects their efficacy and overall performance (Meador & Salazar, 2023). Thus, continually telling oneself they're not "math-minded" can create an identity that blocks their ability to work with numbers.

Math anxiety among PR/Comm undergraduate students is well-documented, with many expressing apprehensions about numbers (Baus & Welch, 2008; Laskin & Sisco, 2015; Maier & Curtin, 2005; Rancer et al., 2013). A few studies have explored ways to address this anxiety among PR students. For example, Laskin and Sisco (2015) found informing students of the basic level of math needed in a course reduced anxiety and promoted interest. Bayliss (2020) found using a flipped classroom format with hands-on activities effective in increasing students' understanding of statistics and their self-efficacy in PR courses. However, beyond these studies, little research exists on reducing math anxiety, addressing frustration, or fostering a lasting relationship with numbers among PR/Comm students. Thus, this study poses the following RQs which explores how we can develop closeness along the three types of numeracies, the impact of the three factors on those numeracies, and potential strategies to nurture an overall closeness to numbers:

RQ1: How do PR/Comm students/professionals develop ability to:

(a) learn basic math/statistical skills (i.e., practical numeracy), (b) engage comfortably in discussions about numbers at school/work (i.e., civic numeracy), and (c) appreciate the value of numbers in the field (i.e., cultural numeracy) for the long run, not just for a single task/course?

RQ2: How do (a) spatial, (b) social, and (c) experiential factors affect this closeness?

RQ3: What strategies are helpful in developing closeness to numbers?

Method

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with students (n=15) and professionals (n=20), including educators, practitioners, and researchers in the field. Some students were enrolled in PR programs, while others took PR classes within Communication programs. Some professionals worked in PR, while others performed PR tasks within broader communication roles. I contacted PR educators and practitioners via email, securing two educators and two professionals to interview. The rest responded to my LinkedIn post. Everyone who agreed to participate was interviewed. All interviews were recorded on Zoom with permission. Due to limited funding, only student participants received a $25 e-gift card incentive.

Sample

Among the 15 students, 13 were undergraduates, one was pursuing a master's degree, and another a doctoral degree. Eight undergraduates were PR majors, two were PR minors, and one was pursuing a PR certificate. Some were pursuing humanities and social science degrees. One undergraduate had just graduated a few days before the interview. The master's student was receiving her degree in journalism. The doctoral student had a master's in strategic communication and was pursuing a doctoral degree in communication and media. The average student age

was 21, with one student being 41. Nine identified as female, and six as male. Twelve identified as White, including one who also identified as Hispanic; three identified as Black, including one who also identified as Asian. None of the students were currently enrolled in classes with me, although eleven had me as an instructor in the past.

Among the twenty professionals, one had a PhD, 12 held master's degrees, and 7 had bachelor's degrees as their highest education level. Twelve had PR/communication degrees, and all were practicing, teaching, or conducting research involving PR/Comm in their current positions. The professionals used data/media analytics, business analytics, and/or statistics in their roles. Thirteen identified as female and seven as male. The participants ranged in age from 23 to 66, with an average age of 38. The sample included 14 who identified as White, including one who also identified as Hispanic, and 6 as Asian/Asian-American/Indian/Indian-American, with one also identifying as European.

Positionality and Reflexivity

I struggled with math until 8th grade, when my math teacher, Ms. Renuka, changed my relationship with it. I grew confident in math, sometimes even enjoying it, and eventually earned an engineering degree before pursuing graduate degrees in communication. I currently work as a researcher and educator in a PR/Comm program. My experiences as (i) someone who worked to develop a closeness to numbers, (ii) an educator who teaches students with varying levels of anxiety, frustration, and interest in numbers, and (iii) a scholar interested in developing the construct of closeness to STEM inspired this study. My background and experiences may have influenced participant disclosure, but it also facilitated access, rapport, and trust during interviews.

Analysis

During interviews, I took notes (Ellingson, 2012; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) to keep track of examples/points I wanted to revisit. I also noted demographics during this time. I continuously reviewed the recorded

transcripts and my notes to keep generating categories using open coding techniques by looking for repetition, similarities, and differences, and then using axial coding I explored the connections between the generated categories, and finally using selective coding I extracted themes that related to the literature presented above (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) of math anxiety, the three dimensions of numeracy, the three factors affecting numeracy, or the strategies they used.

Results

RQ1 was about understanding how participants developed their practical, civic, and cultural numeracy. Participants reported taking math in school, and many had to take at least one such course in college as a requirement. More professionals than students indicated having a good relationship with numbers, and some professionals and students mentioned having a mixed/complicated relationship with numbers.

Practical Numeracy

All professionals reported feeling competent about working with numbers. One professional (White, male, 50) explained, "If [we're] going to be the conscience of the organization and if [we] can't understand that something is wrong with the balance sheets…if you can't understand that the claims that are being made are spurious…you're setting yourself up for failure." Thus, practical numeracy was seen as essential among the professionals.

Developing practical numeracy was not immediate/easy for some professionals. One shared that although their work now involves numbers, they once failed math in school (White, female, 31). Another (White, female, 38) who now does quantitative measurement remembers being told in school that she wasn't good at math and was wasting her time taking advanced classes/tests. Another (Asian, female, 36) said she didn't enjoy math but had to work hard for it because she was anxious about failing. That changed in graduate school, and now she works with

quantitative data often. A PR academic who teaches analytics (White, male, 58) remembers "vividly, standing at the board, dripping sweat, staring at math problems…I could feel the eyes boring holes in the back of my head as I stood there feeling like an utter f***ing failure…and not getting any kind of assist from the teacher."

Embedding numbers in the PR context helped them. For example, one professional (White, female, 31) mentioned,

> With my mortgage…I don't know what any of these numbers mean…but then, when you…put an actual story behind it… make the numbers mean something I feel like it's so much easier to comprehend [like] knowing that these numbers are [going to] help…people get cancer screenings, or…go to the doctors this month.

Some students felt frustrated with numbers, others felt anxiety, and a few felt both. One (White, female, 21) mentioned being brought to tears while working with numbers, and another (Black, Asian, female, 22) remembers liking math until her teacher began calling on students to answer questions, punishing her when she answered incorrectly or took too long. Another (White, female, 21) mentioned it affected her ego: "I associated…math with feeling stupid because…I don't feel this way in English, and I don't feel this way in History…And then…I have to go to math where…I'm [going to] get the answer wrong."

Many students didn't start off feeling negatively about math, but early experiences affected their practical literacy. Some felt that not being in advanced math classes reinforced the belief they weren't good at math. Mentions of math in college then seemed to trigger past trauma. For one, however, a college experience helped renegotiate her practical literacy. This student (Black, female, 22) liked math and was placed in advanced math her senior year of high school. During a difficult time, her teacher was "so uncaring and so hard" on her that she stopped caring about math, and her grade suffered. Years later, in college, she had to take a math class.

She felt extremely anxious but had a professor who took time to check in and answer questions about math and coding, and she ended the class with a 97. She realized, "it wasn't me that was bad at math…even if I didn't enjoy it, I could do it."

Since these students were still in school, it was unsurprising that they did not feel completely competent in their practical numeracy. One (White, male, 20) stated, "until I have that hands-on experience…I don't know…how…knowledgeable I really am." Similarly, another (White, male, 22) expressed, "I just don't think I've had like a ton of experience with that kind of stuff…I am more confident with like analytics, but…like tracking a campaign…I don't have a whole lot of experience with [that]."

Overall, more professionals than students in this study felt a high level of practical literacy. Some professionals did not always have high practical literacy. Many students experienced difficulties with practical numeracy in their early education, contributing to the frustration and/or anxiety they felt when building their practical literacy.

Civic Numeracy

Civic numeracy was prominent among professionals, likely because many of them were working with, interpreting, and reporting numbers to their clients, executives, or other stakeholders as part of their work obligations. For example, one (White, female, 33) mentioned how she needs to share results and insights with content creators, who are often not as familiar with numbers but who need them to be effective. For another (Asian, female, 23), sharing numbers gave her an opportunity "to prove to [her] clients" the impact of analytics and PR, who might otherwise be unable to assess the impact of our work. Another (White, female, 28) mentioned sharing with her interns:

> It's really hard to measure the success of a PR campaign. And it's really hard to convince someone who's not already your client or who doesn't know PR, that PR is worth it…We have to be able to

show them that they are going to get their money's worth if they come with us.

The ability to not only use numbers but to contextualize and communicate to convince clients/colleagues about the value added by PR was emphasized. Many professionals also mentioned frequently turning to their team or colleagues when stuck with numbers or tools.

For many, a parent, sibling, teacher, or peer was there to answer questions. One professional (White, female, 33) described it as having "comfort" in talking about numbers at home, where she would, for fun, occasionally compete with her sister in remembering multiplication tables. Another (Asian, female, 23) mentioned her mother, an accountant, always being there to help with homework. For some, teachers took an interest in explaining things and peers were helpful in clarifying and asking questions about numbers. Overall, for professionals, the ability to speak about numbers seemed to have been nurtured at home and school, which carried into work.

Similarly, many students mentioned engaging in conversations about numbers with their family, teachers, or tutors. Most of the time, it was when they wanted help with numbers, mostly in private or in small settings, and rarely immediately in class or a group setting. As one student (White, Hispanic, female, 20) put it, they "always…did well one on one…if someone's explaining a concept to me and…we're having a conversation…I can grasp what's going on at my own pace." For others, it was online resources where they could ask Google or look it up on YouTube to help practice their civic numeracy by way of building practical numeracy.

Overall, for students, conversations about numbers often involved trying to understand or troubleshoot, whereas for professionals, it was a necessary aspect of their job for showing their professional worth, which aligns with the often high-stakes settings that PR professionals have to

function unde,r including using metrics to show campaign effectiveness, understand audiences, or justify their actions and resources. Those who noted engaging in open conversations also seemed less likely to keep questions or concerns to themselves. Instead, they were able to discuss them openly at home, school, or work, which contributed to their civic numeracy.

Cultural Numeracy

For many students, although there was anxiety/frustration with numbers, they were able to appreciate the role of numbers, especially when they saw it in the context of PR. As one (White, female, 21) explained, we in the field use "math to understand people." Once students realized that the numbers used in PR were not the same as the math they did in early education, they became more appreciative of its relevance in the field.

Many professionals demonstrated a strong sense of cultural numeracy. For some, a love and interest in numbers began at a young age. One (White, male, 64) recalled the excitement he felt in "third grade, where the principal came into the room [for] an advanced math class, and we were all excited to find out the truth about if there was such a thing as negative numbers." Many appreciated the value that numbers brought to the field. As one (White, female, 31) explained, "math is kind of the glue that holds the storytelling together and it's how you can make storytelling go from being a story to something that actually matters and can drive strategy." For some, the ability to create with numbers was exciting. As one (White, male, 50) shared:

> If you're using [numbers] ethically…there is a certainty to what they're doing….even if you're forecasting things, there's a probabilistic certainty of that. You can stand behind that…there's something about real numbers that you get to play with and look at and understand…there's a beauty.

There was excitement in continuing to learn, with one (Asian, male, 24)

expressing a desire to become "a Swiss Army knife analyst" who could do it all.

Factors – Spatial, Social, and Experiential

RQ2 was about understanding how spatial, social, and experiential factors affected this closeness to numbers. The following sections explore these factors.

Spatial Factors

Data did not suggest that spatial factors had an impact on closeness to numbers. One participant from a rural region, two from suburban regions, and five from urban regions had a complicated/mixed relationship with numbers. Seven from suburban regions and four from urban regions did not currently/always have a good relationship with numbers. Five from suburban regions and nine from urban regions reported always having a good relationship with numbers. Overall, there was not enough variation in regions and closeness among participants to assess the impact of spatial factors on closeness to numbers. Everyone, however described growing up with sufficient access to educational resources.

Social Factors

Many professionals and some students mentioned growing up in households where at least one parent had a STEM degree or worked in a science/engineering/medicine/finance/math. Some had a parent/grandparent who was a teacher, including a couple who were math teachers. Some reported receiving help from parents/siblings when they struggled with math. For example, one (Asian, White, female, 44) credited her dad and brothers for helping her with math. Another (Asian, female, 23), mentioned her mother, an accountant, helping her. For one (White, male, 20), it was his grandmother, a math teacher, who explained concepts to him when he struggled. Overall, many professionals came from environments where they had people to turn to with questions about numbers, while this was relatively less common among students.

Experiential Factors

A striking common thread among all professionals was that none expressed internalizing their struggles or negative experiences with numbers in a way that affected their self-concept. This connects back to civic numeracy, which nurtures open conversations over internalization. Although some failed or struggled with courses and had traumatic experiences, they maintained an attitude of patience, allowed themselves to struggle and learn from mistakes, and never gave up on themselves.

One professional (Asian, female, 23) was grateful for the patience within and around her: "Just really allowing myself time to deal with it… [being] patient with myself and other people [being] patient with me….all the patience…together really helped." Another (White, male, 50) shared his ability to allow himself to be human:

> I've made some big whoppers when it comes to number mistakes, and…everybody's made…errors. And I remember the ones that haunt me. And I feel like, yeah, that wasn't right, and I screwed that one up…So...it's double-checking. It's triple-checking… everybody makes mistakes. We're human.

Another (White, female, 38) shared how, even when her teacher didn't have faith in her, she kept faith in herself:

> I took the AP test…I failed every assignment in the class…but I would show up at 7 in the morning for…the teacher, to sit down with me and help me and answer my questions…and my very sweet teacher says…you might be wasting your money on this test…I recommend you didn't take it. And I said, I'm [going to] take it. I studied super hard for it…And I passed.

More students than professionals internalized anxiety and frustration with numbers, except for those who reported feeling somewhat positive towards numbers. Even as some students started doing better in college math courses, like the one student (Black, female, 22) who eventually earned a 97, still felt anxious about working with numbers.

Some students felt that their anxiety drove them to perform poorly. One (White, Hispanic, female, 20) remembered how her anxiety affected her performance and recalled feeling "a tightness in my face that it was almost just like a verge of tears." She remembers sitting at the kitchen counter with her dad who would:

> Yell the things out at you…I just remember he…always looking at me…he couldn't fathom the thought that…I just didn't get it. And I think…'Oh, I'm the dumbest person alive' and obviously I wouldn't…hold up the idea in my head…because…I was excelling in other areas…So, I was like [math is] just stupid.

Others felt their struggling performance caused frustration and anxiety with numbers. One student (White, male, 20) explained, "performance came before the anxiety for me… It advanced to a level where I needed like medical care for it…because I just…sort of planted these seeds of doubt, of…talent and…ability."

Strategies for Developing Closeness to Numbers

RQ3 was about finding the strategies that helped participants develop their closeness to numbers. Data revealed two strategies to build numeracy, while one was to heal experiential trauma.

Use Concrete Contexts to Build Practical and Cultural Numeracy

As one professional (White, female, 31) put it, in school, math felt like "an abstract concept" compared to science, but that flipped once she started her job. Professionals attributed their excitement for working with numbers to the context. For example, many students and professionals mentioned that their desire to work with numbers often came from a desire to engage in data storytelling. This was grounded in a concrete context that mattered to their organization/client. One professional (White, female, 41) explained, "data, it tells the story. Like I could show you…Twitter…is a dumpster fire…like my offices do not need to be spending time there. The data is showing…LinkedIn…they should spend more time there."

Context appears to bring meaning because it's embedded in a frame of problem-solving, which involves building comfort during the uncomfortable moments while figuring it out. For example, one professional (White, male, 64) explained,

> In grad school we had…a very detailed class on statistics, which everybody dreaded…I had to get in the mindset of being a student…it brought me back to my childhood, where I thought math was like a puzzle… they are rules here, and…you'll figure it out as long as you understand what the rule is.

This participant helps instill in his students a similar approach of problem-solving with data. One (White, female, 26) wished college PR classes, including writing courses, would incorporate more numbers into the context. Overall, several agreed on the power of having a concrete PR context that provides a problem-solving approach to help inspire practical numeracy by means of cultural numeracy.

Nurture a Safe Community to Practice Civic Numeracy

Many mentioned that when they are stuck with numbers, they approach others on their team, peers, colleagues, mentors, teachers, or family for help. Feeling comfortable asking for help, as discussed in the previous section, was nurtured from a young age for some. When they felt stuck or didn't understand something, they had people who did not shame them but instead took the time to explain. Some even mentioned using online resources such as seminars, Google, YouTube, or Codecademy for help. Whether in-person or online, having a safe network of support seemed helpful in building civic numeracy.

Inoculation Against the Number Trauma and Negative Self-talk – "It's Not the Same Math"

As one professional explained, "it is important to remember that it's not the math we are taught in school" (White, female, 41). One (White, male, 50) says they use the term "data" to avoid triggering past notions

of math. The thing to remember, as one professional (Asian, female, 36) explained, is:

> What we want to be focused on is not the math, it's the interpretation of the math, of the results of the math, and when you can provide…data-driven results and data-driven insights, that's when people will listen to you…that's the value you're adding to your employers and that's the way to get jobs.

In fact, it is often this aspect of data interpretation and presentation to advise clients that students should be trained on, given that they are rarely afforded opportunities to complete full PR campaigns. Several students echoed that they felt relieved when they realized that the numbers in our field are not the same as those they associate with their trauma. However, they acknowledge that they might still be triggered by it, so as one student explained, "if you're [approaching] it from like an 'everyone should know this' attitude then…[the] anxiety just gets greater," and it becomes hard for the student to be open to learning and to not engage in negative self-talk. Thus, it seems effective to inoculate against past trauma or negative self-talk, but letting the student/professional understand that the use of numbers is very different from their past experiences and encourage them to approach it using a fresh slate of mind.

Discussion

This study examined closeness to numbers through practical, civic, and cultural numeracy among PR/Comm professionals and students. Students often struggled with math anxiety/frustration stemming from early experiences. While some professionals had similar struggles, many reported high levels of practical numeracy. Civic numeracy was more common among professionals, likely due to workplace demands and support networks fostering open dialogue. Both groups valued cultural numeracy, regardless of their practical or civic numeracies. Experiential factors shaped relationships with numbers, with professionals

demonstrating resilience and a growth mindset, while students often internalizing negative experiences. Three strategies emerged to foster closeness to numbers: (i) using concrete contexts to build practical and cultural numeracy, (ii) nurturing supportive communities to practice civic numeracy, and (iii) inoculating against math-related trauma and negative self-talk by encouraging a fresh mindset.

Theoretical Implications

Grounding abstract concepts in concrete contexts aligns with concreteness effects (Borghi et al., 2017; Tallapragada et al., 2021). Concrete contexts promote quick and accurate processing (Stadthagen-Gonzalez & Davis, 2006) while abstract language can trigger existing schemas (DiMaggio, 1997), potentially explaining the aversion to terms like "math" or "numbers." Future research should further explore the role of abstract-concrete cognition in this area.

Findings also align with prior research showing that experiential factors such as self-concept ("I am good at math"), self-esteem ("I like math"), and self-efficacy ("I can work hard at math") have an impact on one's closeness to numbers (Hay et al., 2021, p. 266). While coursework helped, having a positive self-concept was more critical for reducing anxiety/frustration (Ahmed et al., 2012; Meece et al., 1990). Although some suggested an inoculative approach, future research should explore how to improve self-concept and inner narratives about data literacy, including deconstructing negative self-images and fostering confidence through patience and resilience. Redefining what it means to be "good" at math, statistics, or numbers can challenge misperceptions and strengthen self-concept around numeracy. Additionally, given the significance of civic numeracy, future research can explore how such supportive networks can facilitate such reconstructions.

While in-depth interviews and my connection to the topic provided deep insights, they may have also influenced responses, and so replicating and triangulating these findings through other methods, such as surveys to

validate a scale for closeness to numbers or online/ psychophysiological experiments to test proposed strategies, would strengthen the results.

Practical Implications

This study recommends grounding PR/Comm education in concrete contexts using meaningful organizational problems to help our students/professionals approach numbers with curiosity and eagerness. Building on this idea, the CPRE (2023) recommends integrating data across the curriculum (e.g., writing and capstone courses) rather than confining it to the Research Methods or Analytics courses. Assignments could include real-world inspired simulations or case studies involving data interpretations, visualizations, and presentations to nurture practical and civic numeracy simultaneously. Such exercises can also help in redefining internal narratives around working with numbers and contribute positively to their identity with numbers.

Reports, including CPRE (2023) and GBOK (Manley & Valin, 2017), show the growing recognition of data literacy in the field. However, as CPRE (2023) notes, administrative support is crucial for integrating data skills into curricula, and offering professional development opportunities is crucial for nurturing this closeness at work. A recent report commissioned by Tableau (Forrester, 2022) surveying about 2000 employees and managers across 10 countries found that many organizations valued data literacy but lacked in providing training on it. Many employees also reported feeling frustrated with their data skills and hesitant to seek help. They found that organizations that invested in building data literacy among their employees reported higher productivity, employee satisfaction, and retention. These reports and this study underscore the need to provide training, but also to create supportive environments that nurture this closeness to numbers that could ultimately impact practitioners' ability to successfully implement the Barcelona Principles 3.0 (AMEC, 2022).

Overall, we must stop perpetuating the notion that PR is for those who hate math. As educators and practitioners, we must find ways

to nurture closeness to numbers, regardless of one's prior experiences, knowledge, or skills, before entering our field or while in it.

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Teaching Brief/GIFT

Using AI Arts-based Audience Personas for Deepening Audience Analysis Incorporating DEI

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ABSTRACT

Audience analysis is crucial for planning and developing effective communication strategies. It involves gaining a deeper understanding of audience demographics and psychographic data to create strategies that engage audiences around the specific goals of an organization, brand, or public figure. Through the theoretical lens of audience analysis theories in strategic communication and marketing, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles and ethics, and arts-based pedagogical techniques, this teaching brief explores audience personas and the practical application of artificial intelligence (AI) prompt engineering for image generation. Through this assignment, students enhanced their understanding of audience analysis and segmentation while practicing the ethical use of AI guided by DEI guidelines. Specifically, students learned how to represent audience diversity in research data collection equally, audience segmentation profile descriptions that reflect respectful and realistic representations of gender identities and race, detailing the visual and textual descriptions of their needs, interests, and culture. This class assignment could be useful for undergraduate courses such as public speaking, public relations, strategic communication, communication research, public relations campaigns, and social media marketing.

Keywords: public relations, social media marketing, strategic communication, online and social media

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Theoretical Rationale

In strategic communication, audience segmentation organizes people into category groups according to specific shared criteria among individuals of a population (Holtzhausen et al., 2021). Developing well-defined audience segmentation strategies is crucial for brands, public figures, and organizations. Now, more than ever, communication strategies focus on niche audiences, targeting characteristics such as localization, interests, and age groups due to the high use of social media platforms and diversity in content (Freberg, 2021; Freberg & Sutherland, 2022).

In social media strategies, it is crucial to develop audience profiles to collect broad criteria (i.e., demographic data) and specific criteria (i.e., nutritional preferences, hobbies, needs) that allow audience segmentation and sub-segmentation to develop strategies tailored to audiences' needs and interests (Freberg, 2021). For example, in social media strategies, understanding audiences enables communication and marketing practitioners to tailor content strategies according to audiences' needs and attract their attention to engage them effectively and achieve communication goals (Atherton, 2023). In the communication strategy planning process, audience personas are a versatile tool that summarizes the key data of each audience segment into a fictional character used for developing a communication strategy or tactic and choosing the appropriate communication channels that cater to audiences, such as influencers on social media. As third-party communication conduits, influencers are agents that cultivate online communities while supporting message positioning for a niche audience (Enke & Borchers, 2021). In this process, audience personas source information into curating—or choosing— the influencers to foster audience engagement (Chen & Ren, 2024) to place messages that allow them to achieve the communication goals of an organization, brand, or public figure (Vieira et al., 2023).

Audience Personas as a Tool for Strategic Audience Analysis

Several research techniques have been explored to develop compelling profiles for audience segmentation, such as audience personas and social listening (Simkin & Dibb, 2013). Rooted in user experience (UX), since the 1990s, computer programmers have used audience personas to create user profiles that describe audiences' needs and develop seamless experiences with computer systems and technological devices (Cooper, 1999; Nielsen & Hansen, 2014). Later, marketers and strategic communication professionals adopted personas to enhance demographic and psychographic characteristics analysis (Marshall et al., 2015). In this way, advertisers, marketers, and communication professionals utilize audience personas in audience analysis by creating fictional characters that facilitate a better understanding of audiences to develop communication strategies (Mogull, 2024).

Audience personas, as a tool, enable communication professionals to plan more tailored tactics that move beyond listing target audiences' characteristics towards providing a holistic outlook of audiences' personality traits to provide more information and visual inspiration to develop strategies that evoke emotions, interests, and engages audiences positively resonating with their values and identity (Mahoney & Tang, 2024; Quesenberry, 2020).

Arts-based Pedagogy

Higher education pedagogy promotes interdisciplinarity and multidisciplinary learning by integrating instructional tools such as arts-based techniques (Rieger et al., 2020). For instance, using art such as visuals and drawings can encourage creativity and deeper insight into a topic (Hunter & Frawley, 2023). Moreover, arts-based activities represent diverse populations' identities, such as race and cultural practices (Chávez et al., 2020), such as first-generation university students. For example, using collage as an arts-based technique enables students to

use images, drawings, and notes to convey their analysis in reflective practices (Simmons & Daley, 2013). Collages frequently use materials such as magazine and newspaper pictures or online platforms to represent populations and social issues visually (Irimiás et al., 2022; Whitelaw, 2021). Arts-based collages can be applied to audience personas to teach students audience analysis techniques and develop communication strategies.

In this assignment, students utilized AI-image generators to create three audience persona profiles based on audience segmentation analysis research reports describing demographic and psychographic data. Furthermore, students applied skills acquired in visual design courses, such as taking pictures, image editing, and layout design, to develop the three audience persona profiles using HubSpot guidelines and Canva.

Lecture Preparation

Students received a 60-minute class session on audience analysis, divided into a lecture and a practical section. In the lecture, the instructor used Freberg's materials about audience segmentation and demographic and psychographic characteristics, explaining how these concepts are related to public relations and strategic communication strategies. Additionally, the lecture covered DEI principles and how to integrate these into audience analysis and segmentation. The following section delves deeper into DEI and audience personas in strategic communication and the concepts revised with students.

The final section of the lecture examined the concept and application of audience personas through Jacobson's (2020) materials and Mogull's (2024) studies relevant to strategic communications and public relations. Finally, the instructor discussed the Flywheel and Funnel models of public relations, emphasizing their use in developing communication strategies tailored to audiences' interests and preferences (Freberg, 2024).

The practical section of the lecture followed a workshop modality in a computer lab to introduce students to online tools and platforms

for creating audience personas. Students applied several guidelines for exploring prompt engineering using AI tools based on LLM techniques to craft effective prompts with consistent descriptions (Mizrahi, 2024). Moreover, we applied the DEI guidelines to describe gender identity, race, and other frequent characteristics of audiences that accurately represented each audience segment.

Among the PR and advertising tools agencies use, we explored:

- The use of *HubSpot* to develop brand and audience personas.
- *Canva*'s features to design slide presentations, collages, multimedia materials, color palettes, and picture editing.
- *Gencraft*. A free AI image generator to explore prompt engineering. Demographic and psychographic descriptors of personal characteristics were used to create audience personas.

As part of the class, students were shown examples of audience personas, and we discussed emerging questions (See Annexes).

Audience Personas and DEI Practices in Strategic Communication

Strategic communication campaign models have been criticized for using audience segmentation based on cultural stereotypes (Waters & Farwell, 2022) and how this practice leads to cultural misrepresentation by relying exclusively on demographic studies that translate into communication tactics and collaterals that do not represent the "full picture" of real audiences' and stakeholders' diversity of an organization or a brand (Sisco et al., 2024).

To address this issue, interdisciplinary research and practice in strategic communication have incorporated psychographic studies focused on identifying lifestyle, culture, and identity traits that can provide more profound knowledge about audiences (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2018). Several advances have been made, such as training public relations professionals through professional and student organizations, such as Public Relations Student Society of America's (PRSSA) Diversity, Equity,

and Inclusion Toolkit, which provides several resources for future and current professionals on bias, cultural identity, writing practices, and other resources for developing strategic communication campaigns and also how to embrace professional behaviors for communication professionals with equity (Fiske et al., 2016; PRSSA, 2021).

Overcoming issues of DEI in communication campaigns and professional and academic scenarios requires learning more about representing the identity and culture of audiences based on research practices (Berman et al., 2023). Audience personas have the potential to encompass the practice ethics guided by DEI, gender, and race to create accurate representations for communication strategies and tactics tailored to audiences' real needs and concerns, thereby developing strategic communication that is effective and inclusive.

The assignment deepened the application of DEI's concepts and guidelines, which were revised in a public relations principles course. In this way, students applied PRSSA's DEI Toolkit (Fiske et al., 2016, PRSSA 2021) concepts to research by considering the inclusion of diverse gender identities.

The Assignment: Creating Audience Personas for Your Client's Audience

Students gathered to work in teams of four members to create a male and female audience persona representing the target audiences of a case study based on a fictional healthy-food venue. This class assignment has been applied in a public relations principles course for undergraduate students, developing a case study as a final project in a Hispanic-serving institution (HSI) with a culturally diverse White, Asian-American, and Latino student body. This assignment aimed to understand niche audience characteristics and the scope of audience analysis to develop a communication strategy (see Appendix A).

Class Discussion

After student presentations, the instructor engaged student teams in dialogue using the following questions.

1. How do your personas' preferred media align with the client-specific needs, and how?
2. What ideas emerged as you learned more about the audiences' interests in developing communication tactics that engage audiences around your client's communication goals?
3. Which characteristics must we include in the communication strategy to appeal to audience diversity?
4. Which life stories, struggles, or concerns are crucial for your audience, and how do you suggest addressing them?

This assignment can be helpful as an in-person classroom activity, under a hybrid instruction mode, or online by providing a case study with audience descriptors. It is recommended that instructors negotiate with campus organizations to access briefing information and collaborate further. Moreover, it is a valuable approach that students have some prior knowledge and skills about qualitative research skills for in-depth interviewing and participant observation. It is essential to mention that this class activity requires a computer lab and an internet connection.

Summary of Student Learning Outcomes

By developing an audience persona, students' learning objectives focused on 1) understanding and displaying visual demographic and psychographic characteristics of audiences that allow a realistic audience representation, 2) clearly describing diverse audience needs and interests, as well as best-suited communication conduits to approach them with information to guide the development of communication strategies adapted to a client or case study, 3) promote students' career readiness using tools technological tools professionals are using such as audience personas, AI image generators to practice prompt engineering, and web-based online tools to create graphics and presentations.

Audience personas allowed students to deepen their knowledge and understanding of audience analysis tools as part of communication strategy processes. For example, by developing audience personas,

students learned about the target audience's social media preferences regarding platforms and favorite content formats. For instance, by learning more about students' concerns and interests in the affordability of healthy meals, a student team proposed creating Instagram Reels to create a series for the students' healthy nutrition and workouts.

Moreover, students became familiar with platforms and online tools communication professionals use in professional scenarios for creating audience profiles by exploring audiences' demographic and psychographic characteristics. Additionally, students could connect clients' communication goals with audiences' needs and interests to brainstorm communication strategies to engage audiences.

From a pedagogical perspective, using audience personas as an assignment through an arts-based approach motivated students to explore their creativity and have visual cues to guide creative content creation. Students manifested that the activity was enjoyable to combine field research and creative work to get inspiration as they advanced in developing a strategy. Students had positive experiences with AI image generators. They practiced prompt writing to incorporate artificial intelligence tools into their creative work as an innovative practice used in professional scenarios.

During the presentations, students discussed the importance of audience data statistics and using qualitative tools to nuance audience descriptions. For example, a team commented, "Approaching other students and asking them about their interests and needs was great for gathering information about how to create resources that matter to them around their lifestyles."

Students also mentioned how audience personas are valuable for practicing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) theories and concepts learned in prior courses, such as gender, critical race theory, and intercultural communication courses about minority representation,

gender, and identity. Specifically, student teams, when asked about diversity representation in audiences, highlighted during the class discussion in their presentations how audience personas as a tool allowed them to explore an accurate representation of audiences' characteristics to develop a communication strategy that speaks to their needs and identity without wrongfully stereotyping people. Moreover, audience personas permitted students of specific audiences to approach audiences with empathy and to portray their identities respectfully and realistically (Thomas, 2022). Therefore, student learning outcomes assessed in this assignment coincide with prior studies evaluating tools for audience analysis, which suggest that developing audience personas qualitatively about an audience group allowed them to create a more realistic audience representation (Scott et al., 2024).

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Appendix A
Case Study for Audience Personas

The Restaurant Reward System for SoCal University Students

Overview

The restaurant salad bar is looking to introduce a new college discount system for students in Southern California. The goal is to create a deeper understanding of audience demographic and psychographics to develop an efficient communication strategy to strengthen the brand's connection with university students.

Your task is to develop an audience analysis using the audience persona tool.

Background

- **Brand Image:** The Restaurant is known for its fresh ingredients, sustainable practices, and customizable menu. The brand is trendy among young people for its convenience, affordability, and commitment to healthy options.
- **Current communication strategies:** The Restaurant uses social media (TikTok and Instagram) to promote its menu, promotions. Recently, the brand started a micro influencer content strategy based on discount codes.
- **Target Audience:** We need to better understand college students across Southern California, especially those attending large public universities from the UC and CSU system.
- **Challenge:** The restaurant wants to promote a new discount system exclusively for students, but it needs to ensure that the program stands out amid competition from other local and national food chains offering student discounts.
- **Ideal expected outcome:** Have more students sign up for the rewards system and create more audience engagement by offering them attractive PR tactics.
- **Objectives:**
    1. Increase brand awareness of The Restaurant's new college discount.

2. Drive foot traffic to Southern California to The Restaurant's locations.
3. Build long-term relationships with the student community.

Deliverables and grading rubric:

- Mini briefing (10 points)
- Persona research report (10 points)
- AI image generation for audience persona profiles (15 points)
- Presentation (5 points)

Total: 40 points

This is a group activity. Gather in teams of four members.

Format. All the deliverables detailed should be developed in one slide presentation.

1. **Mini briefing.** Revise The Restaurant's case study provided above and develop a briefing summary compiling the key information for further developing a communication strategy. Use the following guidelines:
   a. Client's communication goals
   b. Current communication strategies the client currently uses.
   c. Ideal expected outcomes of the client regarding the target audience.
2. **Audience persona research and report.** This deliverable refers to the audience guidelines we revised in class. Audience personas mirror the main demographic and psychographic characteristics of target audiences. Students used the questionnaire in Appendix B.
   Guidelines
   - Remember the DEI guidelines revised in class to represent our diverse audience in terms of ethnicity, gender identity, and culture. Consider approaching people of different gender identities equally (male, female, and LGBTQI+).

   Tasks
   - Developed a questionnaire to interview SoCal CSU and UC undergraduate students. To formulate the questions, reflect on college students' demographic and psychographic characteristics. Consider the diversity regarding gender identity, occupa-

tion, hobbies, favorite music, personal struggles and concerns, personality traits, preferred social media platforms, and content (See Annex for examples provided to students).

- Interview 10 students on our campus who represent The Restaurant's target audience. Aim to include an equal number of males, females, and LGBTQI+ individuals in the data collection process to align with DEI equity guidelines. *Note: Obtain permission from your interviewees to take their pictures for visual cues. If they decline, limit your collection to their responses. Pictures will inspire you to create your personas (e.g., outfits, places, and colors that reflect the target audience).*
- After completing the interviews, create a report summarizing the most frequent results regarding age group range, preferences, demographic and psychographic characteristics, and any additional information about target audiences to develop the audience personas and add it to the slide presentation.

3. **AI image generation for audience persona profiles.** Develop a short description around three personas using the audience persona reports. The purpose is to "humanize" and understand the target audience segments.

Tasks

- Create three fictional personas representing the target audience segments equally to describe a male, female, and LGBTQI+ audience persona.
- Draft a prompt to source AI detailing the personal information of your three personas (name, age, gender identity, personality traits, hobbies, and communication preferences.
  - *Example. Luise is a 20-year-old landscape architecture major who identifies as non-binary he/them. He is a first-generation student from Tijuana, Mexico, living in South LA. Luise works part-time as a cashier in a skate shop to pay his tuition and help his family. He likes dressing in the 90s style with thrifted outfits combining straight jeans and graphic tees. Luise lives on a tight budget and worries about his student loan debt. For this, he aims to get a scholarship, as he has a 3.80 GPA.*
- Introduce the prompt to the AI image generators. Use Gencraft or Canva AI image generator, as we did in class, to create the

three personas and a description of them to source into our audience segmentation.

- Describe the three personas individually on an individual slide and describe their profile using the research report's most common char**acteris**tics your team found, as shown in the following example. (See Annexes for examples).

4. Audience persona showcase. Create a slide presentation using Canva and prepare with your team to present each assignment's deliverables.
   Tasks
   - Create a slide presentation on Canva with all the deliverables.
   - Prepare a 5 to 10-minute group presentation. All members should intervene.
   - Prepare for questions from the audience and take notes on the feedback you will receive from your classmates and the instructor.

Appendix B
Guidelines for questionnaires for interviews and observation

Your team must interview ten people (females, males, and LGBTQIA+) attending CSU and UC Colleges or universities from SoCal. Use these questions as a base and develop up to five more that allow you to learn more about their personality and lifestyle.

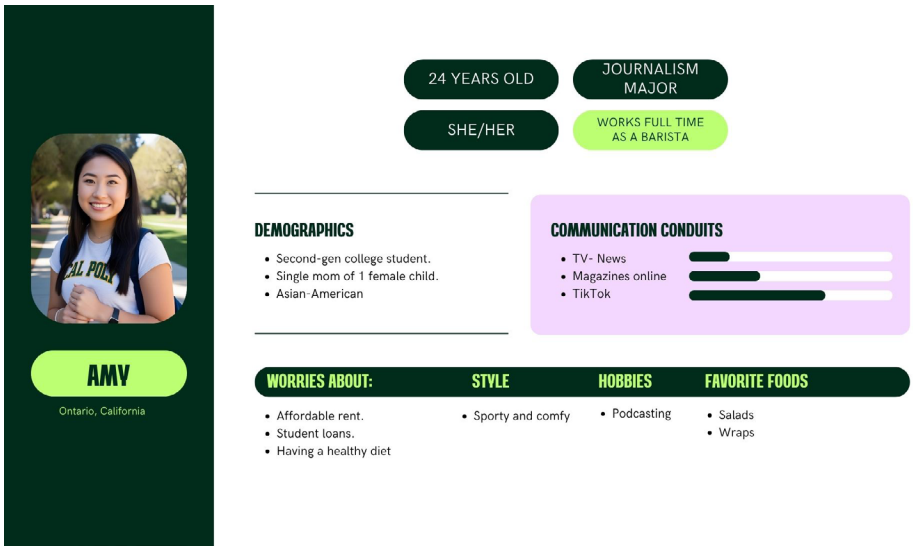
- What do you do for a living?
- What is your major?
- Can you share your gender identity with us?
- What is your age?
- What do you do as a hobby?
- Which is your favorite music?
- What are your struggles?
- What makes you happy?
- What's your fashion style?
- What are their food preferences?
- Do you like reward systems?
- Which social media platforms do you mostly use?
- What content do you enjoy on social media, and why?
- Do you follow any influencers or content creators?

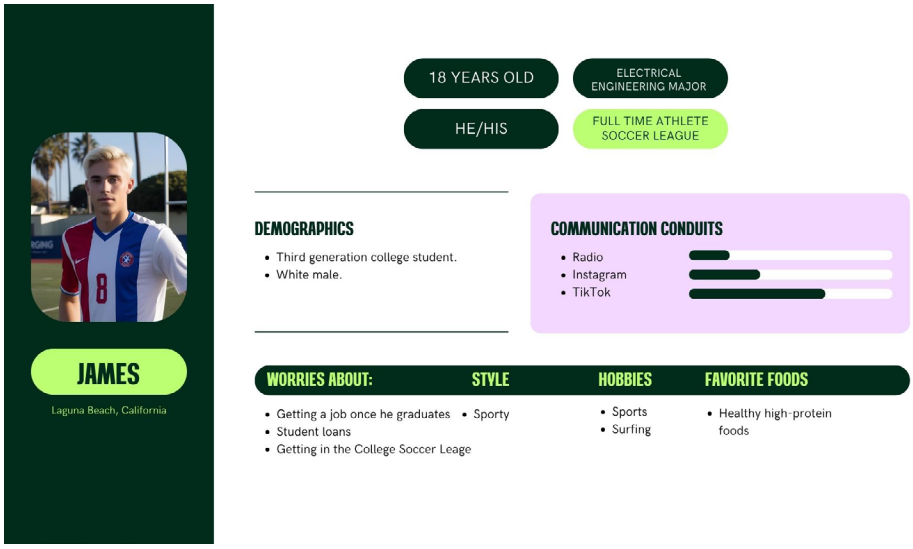
Additional information sources:

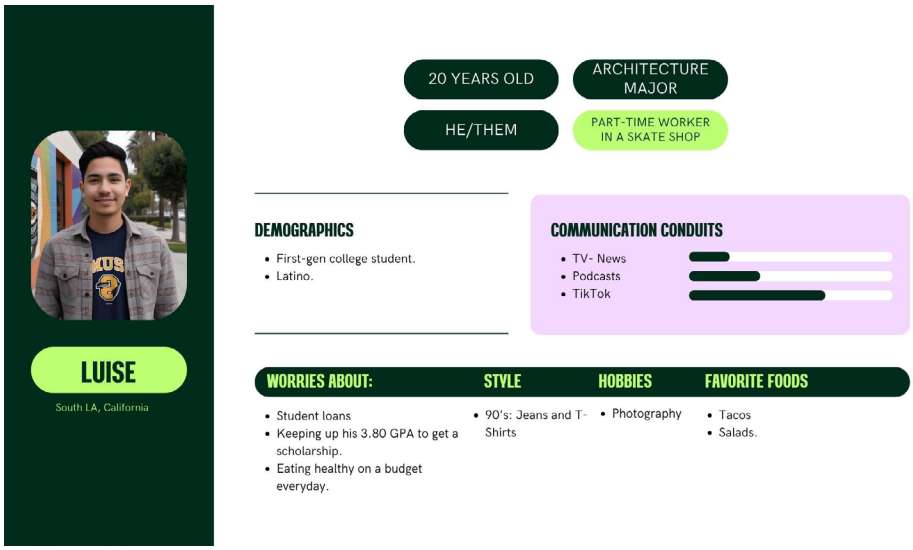
- The instructor suggested that the students explore the university website, social media materials, and client social media accounts to gather additional data about the target audiences that might enrich the audience persona.
- Students were encouraged to do participant observation in campus events and take notes and pictures to inspire their lifestyles and interests.

Appendix C

Audience personas profiles generated with AI (examples provided to students on Canva)






LUISE
South LA, California
20 YEARS OLD
ARCHITECTURE MAJOR
HE/THEM
PART-TIME WORKER IN A SKATE SHOP
DEMOGRAPHICS
• First-gen college student.
• Latino.
COMMUNICATION CONDUITS
• TV- News
• Podcasts
• TikTok
WORRIES ABOUT:
• Student loans
• Keeping up his 3.80 GPA to get a scholarship.
• Eating healthy on a budget everyday.
STYLE
• 90's: Jeans and T-Shirts
HOBBIES
• Photography
FAVORITE FOODS
• Tacos
• Salads.

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Teaching Brief/GIFT

A Simulation Exercise on Tackling AI-triggered Crisis

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ABSTRACT

The rise of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) introduces new challenges to crisis communication. This teaching brief describes a crisis simulation exercise, conducted separately in two crisis communication classes at a university in the United States, where undergraduate public relations students apply crisis communication theories to address a GenAI misuse scenario based on the artificial intelligence (AI) scandal involving Sports Illustrated. Students assume roles of crisis management team members, board members, or journalists to perform specific tasks throughout the simulation. A mock press conference is integrated into the simulation, enabling students to engage in real-world crisis communication dynamics and practice their crisis communication skills in a realistic, high-pressure setting. Afterward, the crisis responses developed in each class are shared for critique, objective feedback, and reflective learning.

Keywords: crisis simulation, crisis communication education, GenAI, role-playing

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Introduction

As Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is transforming the communication and media industry (Cision, 2023), the risk of misuse is also rising, including the use of undisclosed AI-generated content and fabricated sources. These unethical practices can quickly lead to crises, damaging the organization's reputation. Therefore, educators need to equip future public relations professionals with the skills to identify AI-related risks, assess the impact of GenAI misuse on public perception, and develop effective and ethical response strategies to manage crises triggered by such technologies.

Crisis simulation exercises have been recognized as effective tools in public relations education because they enable students to learn by doing (Buzoianu & Bîră, 2024). Role-play, in particular, has been shown to increase student engagement, foster perspective-taking, and improve decision-making (Munna & Kalam, 2021). Crisis simulations also provide an opportunity for students to apply key crisis communication theories—such as Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)—to realistic scenarios, which is especially effective in helping students internalize crisis communication strategies and theories—something that is often difficult to achieve through lectures alone (Yook, 2024).

This teaching brief presents a crisis simulation exercise focused on GenAI misuse: a fictitious fashion magazine, XYZ Magazine, is accused of using fabricated authors with AI-generated headshots to publish product reviews, mirroring the AI-triggered crisis experienced by Sports Illustrated. Using a hypothetical case, this simulation prevents students from replicating Sports Illustrated's crisis response and promotes critical thinking and creative problem-solving.

The value of using an AI-triggered crisis scenario lies in immersing students in a timely and increasingly relevant challenge for

their future careers. GenAI makes it easy to produce highly convincing yet misleading content, accelerating the spread of misinformation and disinformation (Shoaib et al., 2023) and necessitating new approaches to crisis communication. Engaging students with this scenario in a simulation helps them grasp the real-world consequences of organizational misuse of GenAI and develop the skills needed to manage the unique complexities of AI-triggered crises—challenges that traditional crisis scenarios do not capture. It also promotes reflection on other emerging issues arising from the rise of GenAI, such as the ethical use of GenAI by organizations and evolving media ethics in the AI era.

This crisis simulation is designed as a 150-minute learning experience. It has been implemented in two consecutive 75-minute public relations classes and conducted separately in two sections of an undergraduate crisis communication class at a public university in U.S. Competition between classes can motivate students to perform better than they typically would and encourage more objective peer feedback as students feel more comfortable evaluating work from students outside their immediate class group (Kemp & Palmer, 2022).

Student Learning Goals

1. Foster students' ability to evaluate and analyze complex crisis scenarios from various perspectives, promoting critical thinking.
2. Deepen students' understanding of key crisis communication theories and enhance students' ability to effectively apply IRT and SCCT to real-world crises.
3. Help students understand the challenges that GenAI misuse presents to crisis management, fostering greater AI awareness and literacy.
4. Develop students' ability to effectively address AI-triggered crises.

Simulation Design and Alignment with Learning Goals

During the simulation, students are assigned to assume various roles, including Crisis Management Team (CMT) members, board

members, and journalists. CMT members are responsible for leading the development of the crisis response. They must effectively assess the situation, determine appropriate strategies, communicate swiftly, and coordinate internal and external messaging. Their role emphasizes the practical application of IRT and SCCT, as they need to craft responses that address stakeholder concerns while also protecting the organization's reputation.

Board members provide strategic oversight and governance (Lumorus, 2025). They evaluate the proposed crisis strategies through the lens of organizational mission, values, and long-term strategic priorities. Their responsibilities include ensuring that crisis communication is legally compliant, ethically sound, and supporting long-term reputation repair.

Journalists approach the crisis from an external and independent standpoint. Tasked with serving the public interest, they seek to uncover the facts and hold the organization accountable. They will ask critical questions about what happened, why it occurred, and what actions the organization will take to correct and prevent the recurrence of the problem, while preparing timely and accurate coverage. This role trains students to recognize how reporters gather and frame information, interpret organizational messages, and shape public understanding.

Role-playing moves students from passive learning to active, experiential engagement, which is central to achieving learning goals (Munna & Kalam, 2021). By inhabiting different roles, students analyze the crisis from multiple stakeholder perspectives, which fosters critical thinking and helps them evaluate competing interests to make informed decisions. By stepping into the shoes of both internal and external stakeholders, students experience the tension between protecting the organization's reputation and responding to public scrutiny, and gain an understanding of how crisis responses are developed, negotiated, and interpreted from multiple perspectives. Role-playing also deepens their understanding of key crisis communication theories. Applying IRT and

SCCT in real-time enables students to experience how theory guides their decision-making and message options (Kemp & Palmer, 2022; Yook, 2024). Such a transformation of abstract concepts into concrete, memorable learning reinforces students' theoretical understanding and builds confidence in addressing complex, real-world crises. In addition, the simulation immerses students in the distinct challenges posed by GenAI misuse, which they confront directly through their assigned roles. These firsthand encounters sharpen students' AI awareness and literacy, preparing them to respond effectively to AI-triggered crises.

Simulation Procedure

Step 1: Role Assignment

This simulation exercise begins with role assignment. Roles are assigned randomly to ensure fairness and minimize bias. Each student draws lots to decide their roles. In each class section of about 20 students, 8-9 assume the role of CMT members, 5-6 serve as board members, and 5-6 act as journalists.

Step 2: Crisis Scenario Briefing

Next, students are introduced to the crisis scenario: "a leading news site has published a story exposing XYZ Magazine (a major fashion magazine) for using fabricated authors with AI-generated headshots to publish product reviews. This revelation has sparked outrage among XYZ Magazine's readers, who have flooded social media and the magazine's email inbox with accusations, questioning the organization's ethics and credibility. Simultaneously, XYZ Magazine's staff journalists have voiced dissatisfaction, demanding responses and expressing concerns that the magazine's practices have compromised their journalistic integrity. XYZ Magazine's CMT thus calls an emergency meeting to address this challenging situation." This brief and focused scenario realistically reflects the insufficient information characteristic of the early stages of a real-world crisis, prompting students to examine the situation critically.

Step 3: Task Performing

Then, the CMT uses 60 minutes to complete four tasks: (1) proposing a crisis response stance ranging from defensive to accommodative and presenting crisis response strategy recommendations for the board; (2) developing a holding statement for journalists; (3) crafting an internal response to address employee concerns, and (4) preparing a crisis statement for the press conference. The limited time available to CMT members mimics the time pressure experienced in real-world crisis communication.

Having already learned how to write holding and crisis statements, students who assume the role of CMT members first engage in a discussion that draws on IRT and SCCT to determine the crisis response stance and strategies they will propose. After obtaining the board's approval of the crisis response stance and strategy, they split into smaller groups to work separately on the abovementioned tasks. Finally, the CMT collaborates with the board to select a spokesperson and prepare them to respond to journalists' questions during the press conference.

The board members' task is to review and approve CMT's proposed crisis response stance and strategies, ensuring they align with XYZ Magazine's organizational goals and values and are legally compliant and ethically sound. To support this task, only board members receive the mission, vision, and value statements specifically created for XYZ Magazine (see Appendix A), which can help them evaluate whether the proposed responses reflect the organization's mission. Board members also review and provide input on the holding statement, internal response, and crisis statement drafted by CMT to ensure consistency across all messaging. Board members are encouraged to apply IRT and SCCT to assess whether the proposed responses are suitable, given the perceived level of crisis responsibility, and whether the selected message options are effective in addressing stakeholder concerns.

Meanwhile, journalists move to a separate space after the crisis scenario briefing to prepare questions for the press conference. This arrangement isolates journalists from CMT and board members' internal discussion, allowing both internal and external publics to focus on their respective tasks while simulating a realistic crisis communication environment. To help journalists effectively perform their tasks, they are provided with general news reporting guidance. They are also encouraged to adopt IRT and SCCT to assess whether the crisis response is appropriate and credible.

Step 4: Press Conference

The press conference begins at the start of the second exercise session. The spokesperson delivers the crisis statement, and then journalists ask questions, which the spokesperson addresses individually. The press conference concludes when the spokesperson deems it appropriate to adjourn.

Step 5: Journalists Individually Draft Reports on the Press Conference

Following the press conference, each journalist independently drafts a brief report summarizing the conference's key messages. These reports are then shared with their class, allowing students to evaluate how effectively the spokesperson addresses the journalists' questions and communicates the key messages, and whether the spokesperson's messages came across.

Step 6: Critiquing Crisis Responses

After the press conference, the professor shares the internal responses and crisis statements created by both crisis communication classes for peer critique (see Appendix B for examples of student work). Students are asked to identify the crisis response stance and specific strategies used in the statements based on IRT and SCCT, assess how well the responses align with SCCT's recommendations, and compare the

approaches taken by the two classes. Additionally, students are encouraged to discuss what worked well and what could be improved to enhance the effectiveness of crisis communication.

Next, the professor presents the real-world response from Sports Illustrated to its AI scandal. Sports Illustrated disputed the accuracy of the allegations that it had published AI-generated articles and attributed the content to a third-party company, AdVon Commerce (see Appendix C for Sports Illustrated's official statement and analysis of its statement). Students are asked to use IRT and SCCT to identify the crisis response stance and strategies used by Sports Illustrated and compare this real response with their own responses. This comparison further encourages students to think deeply about what constitutes effective crisis communication.

Step 7: Reflection

After the critiquing session, students complete a self-reflective assessment (see Appendix D) to evaluate their learning and articulate key takeaways.

Connection to Public Relations Theories

The theoretical underpinnings of this crisis simulation exercise include IRT (Benoit, 1997) and SCCT (Coombs, 2007). Both theories are introduced and discussed early in the course before the simulation. The IRT provides students with a comprehensive list of strategies that organizations can adopt to restore their image after a crisis. SCCT offers students a structured approach to determining appropriate crisis response strategies. Specifically, SCCT guides students in assessing the crisis situation by examining the type of crisis and the associated crisis responsibility faced by an organization, as well as the organization's crisis history and prior reputation. Together, these two theories provide students with a comprehensive framework to devise effective crisis communication strategies.

In the AI-triggered crisis scenario presented in this simulation, the case falls into the preventable crisis cluster outlined by SCCT because it results from ethical lapses by the organization and its staff rather than uncontrollable factors. In high-responsibility crises like this, the most appropriate and ethical response is to adopt a rebuilding posture and take corrective actions. This means offering a sincere apology to readers and employees and implementing concrete measures such as stronger editorial oversight and clear policies for AI use. By contrast, responses like denial or shifting blame to a third party are least appropriate, since they deflect responsibility and risk causing even greater harm to the organization's reputation.

Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

Student learning outcomes are evaluated and evidenced in two major ways. First, a critical analysis of the crisis responses developed by students themselves, their peers in another class, and the real-world response from Sports Illustrated was conducted. During the critique stage, students correctly identified the crisis response stance and strategies employed in their response, the other class's response, and Sports Illustrated's official response. They also examined each developed internal and external response in detail to pinpoint improvements that can enhance crisis communication outcomes.

In addition, students also completed a self-reflective assessment of this crisis simulation exercise (see Appendix D for the full instrument). Specifically, Questions 4–8 measured their perceived learning gains on a 5-point Likert scale. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for self-assessment scores by role on Questions 4–8.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Student Self-Assessment Scores by Role (Questions 4–8)

Role	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
Crisis Management Team	4.39 (0.78)	4.33 (0.77)	4.17 (0.71)	4.06 (0.80)	4.17 (0.62)
Board Members	4.00 (0.71)	4.00 (0.91)	3.85 (0.90)	4.00 (0.71)	3.92 (0.76)
Journalists	3.78 (0.67)	4.11 (0.60)	3.78 (0.67)	3.78 (0.67)	3.89 (0.78)

Note. Standard deviations are presented in parentheses.

The results indicated that across all five questions, students rated this crisis simulation exercise highly, with mean scores generally at or above 4.0 on a 5-point Likert scale. Such results demonstrate that this simulation successfully achieved its intended learning goals. In line with Learning Goal 1, students rated the simulation very useful for understanding the real-world application of crisis communication (Q5, M = 4.18), suggesting that applying crisis communication theories in a realistic scenario and role-playing can foster students' ability to analyze complex crisis scenarios and prompt critical thinking. Supporting Learning Goal 2, students reported that this exercise deepened their understanding of crisis communication principles and response strategies (Q4, M = 4.13) and felt more prepared to apply those strategies in the future (Q6, M = 3.98). Addressing Learning Goal 3, students indicated that the exercise enhanced their understanding of the challenges specific to managing AI-related crises (Q7, M = 3.98). Finally, consistent with Learning Goal 4, they expressed a high level of preparedness to handle AI-triggered crises in the future (Q8, M = 4.03).

Notably, students assigned to the CMT consistently reported the highest average scores across all items. This may be because they

have to actively apply crisis communication theories to develop response strategies from scratch, a task that demands initiative, creativity, and critical thinking. In contrast, students in the journalist role reported the lowest scores on four of the five questions. This may indicate that, while the journalist role is valuable, it provides fewer opportunities to practice developing response strategies. However, it is important to note that results from one-way ANOVA revealed no statistically significant differences among the three groups in any of the five questions. Thus, these trends are not definitive. However, one practical takeaway is that rotating roles across multiple crisis simulations can enhance learning outcomes by allowing each student to experience different perspectives and take on various responsibilities.

Moreover, students' qualitative comments further demonstrate that this crisis simulation effectively met its intended learning goals. It helped students better understand and apply crisis communication theories, especially in handling AI-triggered crises. Below is a small sample of feedback students provided in the self-evaluation questionnaire[1].

- "I feel like this simulation enhanced (m)by competencies a great deal. I had a way to apply the information learned in class in a class setting where I could receive peer and instructor feedback."
- "It helped me understand the importance of the strategy behind the messaging and how to use the best strategy. Initially I almost used a denial strategy, but after further discussion realized a more accommodating strategy would be better."
- "Before I had never thought through a "crisis" before and now I feel confident to have those critical thinking skills to be able to get through one."
- "I am more aware of stakeholders I need to address, important information to include in statements, and how a non-empathetic response sounds to an audience."
- "It helped me to think through what the best response is to keep

trust in your organization but also take accountability. I also think it helped me prepare what the best way is to answer questions I don't know the answers to."

- "The simulation definitely improved my understanding of crisis communication. I feel much more prepared to handle a crisis under pressure while still collaborating and covering necessary details."

[1]This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university with which the researchers are affiliated. All student responses are reported in accordance with IRB-approved guidelines.

Conclusion

This AI-triggered crisis simulation offers a timely and effective way to prepare students for the evolving demands of crisis communication. Based on a realistic GenAI misuse scenario, it exposes students to crisis dynamics that differ from traditional cases. Through role-playing and practical application of crisis communication theories, students deepen their theoretical understanding and gain practical experience. As GenAI continues to reshape the field, such exercises are crucial for developing the awareness and skills that future professionals need to manage AI-related crises with confidence and integrity.

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Appendix A
Mission, Value, and Vision Statement of XYZ Magazine

Mission Statement of XYZ Magazine

Our mission is to inspire and empower individuals through fashion by providing the latest trends, expert insights, and creative content. We aim to be a trusted resource for fashion enthusiasts, showcasing diverse styles and voices while encouraging self-expression and confidence in every reader.

Value Statement of XYZ Magazine

We value creativity, inclusivity, and innovation. Our content embraces diversity in all its forms, celebrating fashion as a tool for personal expression regardless of age, size, gender, or background. We are committed to responsible and sustainable fashion practices, providing our audience with both aspirational and attainable style inspiration. Above all, we believe fashion should be a force for individuality, positivity, and empowerment.

Vision Statement of XYZ Magazine

Our vision is to be the leading voice in fashion media, shaping the future of style through innovation and inclusivity.

Appendix B
Examples of Student Work

Internal Response

XYZ Employees,

We know you are all aware of the recent AI misuse within our company. Firstly, we want to directly apologize to each of you for the disruption to your credibility as a journalist. We deeply value your individual insight and emphasize how important you are to our company.

Our team and the board are currently investigating the situation, but until final evaluations are complete we want to introduce new policies that will be put in place to prevent this from happening in the future.

While we trust the authenticity of your work, we will be hiring a team of AI analysts that will create guidelines they will use to review all work prior to being published. Additionally, we will be having mandatory AI training over the next two weeks aimed at encouraging a deeper understanding of this developing technology.

If you have any comments or suggestions you wish to share on these developments, please feel free to reach out to our team.

XYZ Management

Crisis Statement

Thank you for gathering here today to discuss our ongoing investigation. We first wanted to apologize for any mistrust this might have caused customers to feel towards our company. Our biggest values as an organization are integrity, transparency, and the trust of our customers. In the spirit of these values, these next steps are of the upmost importance to us.

First off, we have removed any and all AI generated product reviews from our website. From here on out, all future use of AI in our

content will be disclosed. We have placed our product reviews editor on leave pending further investigation.

We want all current and future employees to fully understand where our priorities lie in terms of AI ethics and uses. Starting earlier today, all of our employees will be required to complete an AI ethics and awareness course. Together with our board, we are in the process of establishing an AI Ethics Review Committee. All published content will be approved through this committee, in accordance with the guidelines set forth in Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics.

At our core, we are committed to providing our customers with trustworthy, responsible and sustainable fashion practices and information. We appreciate your patience and cooperation as we continue in our investigation and we will update you as further information arises.

Appendix C
Sports Illustrated's Official Statement on the AI-Generated Content Allegations

Today, an article was published alleging that Sports Illustrated published AI-generated articles. According to our initial investigation, this is not accurate.

The articles in question were product reviews and were licensed content from an external, third-party company, AdVon Commerce. A number of AdVon's e-commerce articles ran on certain Arena websites. We continually monitor our partners and were in the midst of a review when these allegations were raised.

AdVon has assured us that all of the articles in question were written and edited by humans. According to AdVon, their writers, editors, and researchers create and curate content and follow a policy that involves using both counter-plagiarism and counter-AI software on all content. However, we have learned that AdVon had writers use a pen or pseudo name in certain articles to protect author privacy – actions we strongly condemn – and we are removing the content while our internal investigation continues and have since ended the partnership.

– Spokesperson for The Arena Group

Note. *Sports Illustrated* adopted a defensive crisis response stance aimed at minimizing its responsibility in response to allegations. It attributed the issue to a third-party company, AdVon Commerce, which claimed the articles were human-written. Sports Illustrated's response reflects SCCT's diminishment posture and IRT's evasion of responsibility strategy, specifically by implying the organization lacked direct control over the vendor's practices. While the company condemned the use of pseudonyms and took corrective actions (removing content, launching an investigation, and ending the vendor partnership), it did not accept direct responsibility.

Appendix D
Self-reflective Assessment of Crisis Simulation Exercise
On which team did you participate?

1. On which team did you participate?
   A. In-house crisis management team
   B. Journalists
   C. Board members
2. How would you rate your contribution to your team on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means you were present but made minimal contribution, while 5 means you led the team or made the most significant contributions?
   Select one: 1 2 3 4 5
   Comments about your input:
3. How would you rate your team's performance in this exercise? Which specific areas do you believe your team excelled in, and where could improvements be made?
4. To what extent did this crisis simulation exercise deepen your understanding of the crisis communication principles and response strategies learned from the class?
   1. Not at all
   2. A little
   3. Somewhat
   4. Quite a bit
   5. To a great deal
5. How useful do you find this crisis simulation exercise in helping you understand the real-world application of crisis communication?
   1. Not useful
   2. Slightly useful
   3. Moderately useful
   4. Very useful
   5. Extremely useful

6. How well has this crisis simulation exercise prepared you to proficiently apply the crisis communication principles and response strategies learned from the class to real-world crisis scenarios in the future?
   1. Not well at all
   2. Slightly well
   3. Moderately well
   4. Very well
   5. Extremely well
7. To what extent did this simulation enhance your understanding of the crisis communication challenges specific to managing a crisis involving AI?
   1. Not at all
   2. A little
   3. Somewhat
   4. Quite a bit
   5. To a great deal
8. After completing this simulation, how prepared do you feel to handle AI-related crises in the future?
   1. Very unprepared
   2. Somewhat unprepared
   3. Neutral
   4. Somewhat prepared
   5. Very prepared
9. What aspect of this crisis simulation exercise did you find most challenging? Please explain it.
10. Do you think this simulation exercise enhanced your crisis communication competencies? If so, please describe the ways in which you believe your competencies have developed.
11. Do you have any suggestions for improving this crisis simulation exercise? If so, please explain.

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Book Review

Strategic Communication Research Methods

Reviewed by
Jacob Long, University of South Carolina

Editor: Marianne Dainton & Pamela J. Lannuttir
Publisher: Cognella, 2021
ISBN: 978-1516578191
https://titles.cognella.com/strategic-communication-research-methods-9798823342704
Number of pages: 287

Introduction

This textbook pitches itself as a choice for upper-level undergraduates and professional master's degree students in public relations and other strategic communication fields. It meets its intended audience where they are, which is thinking more about how a research methods course relates to the workplace than the maze of philosophical and statistical issues that sometimes predominate this subject. Achieving this goal without over-simplifying or leading students into common methodological/inferential "traps" is a challenge, but the text does so well with a key exception to be discussed later. As for its audience, I would not restrict it to just upper-level undergraduates; it will be accessible to any undergraduate in a mass communications field. At the graduate level, it should be serviceable for many professionally-oriented programs but may be too rudimentary if the goal is to train students to carry out scholarly journal-quality research upon course completion.

Structure and Organization

Content is structured into several layers of organization. At the highest level are three parts: "Foundations," "Applying Research Methods," and "Creating a Research Product." Respectively, these parts map onto the abstract and philosophical underpinnings of research like measurement and sampling theory, then a series of engagements with specific methods, and finally some instruction on analysis and presentation of research data. Within each part are chapters which are sensibly chosen, particularly in the middle section in which each chapter maps onto a particular method (surveys, experiments, content analysis, interviews and focus groups, and so on). I found the ordering somewhat curious, placing data analytics and content analysis before what I consider the "classic" methodologies of surveys, interviews/focus groups, and experiments. Of course, instructors can teach them in whatever order they would like without any negative consequence.

Finally, each chapter in the second and third parts of the text are further subdivided into "steps," part of the book's overall emphasis on research methods as a process. There are a few cases where these feel a touch forced, but this is a small price to pay for the meta-lesson that research is carried out methodically and according to a plan. Besides the organization by steps, chapters conclude with sections that contextualize the chapter's subject into the strategic communications profession. For instance, the chapter on data analytics ends with an extended discussion of the specific types of information that strategic communicators use from social media platforms. That discussion includes a wise caution that the most accessible metrics — such as likes and mentions — are generally of limited use for practical purposes. As an instructor, I tend to find it challenging to always have useful real-world examples for the relevance and usefulness of methods, but this textbook does well to supply those to students.

At the end of each chapter is a set of so-called "practice activities." These can be used as inspiration for in-class discussion/active learning activities or as somewhat low-stakes homework assignments to encourage engagement with the reading. Instructors should take care to evaluate each chapter's activities individually for their usefulness as homework; they can be uneven in terms of the amount of effort asked of the student. For instance, one question at the end of the chapter on surveys asks students to read through some questionnaire measurements and identify violations of the prescribed best practices contained in the chapter, a straightforward and not particularly high-effort application of the course content. One activity at the end of the chapter on focus groups and interviews, by contrast, instructs students to create a facilitator guide, conduct and video-record a focus group interview, and then review the recording for insights. Such an activity may be quite valuable, but I raise these competing examples only to advise instructors to pick and choose from these well-conceived activities to match the intended workload for your course and lessons.

Contribution to Public Relations Education

The textbook offers self-contained chapters in a relatively consistent format that offers instructors freedom on how they organize their courses while remaining accessible to students who may not be intrinsically interested in the optimal methods for social scientific research. Supporting instruction, practice questions associated with each chapter can be deployed as needed as assignments or in-class activities; they are fleshed out beyond what may usually be expected from textbooks.

Chapters move fairly quickly while using tables and asides to convey content that does not fit neatly into prose. Despite chapters that are unlikely to cause student concerns about the volume of reading, they tend to cover a lot of ground. I prefer this over failing to mention important aspects of the subject in the service of brevity. I am more methodologist than expert in public relations and even still I rarely found myself thinking that important details or nuances were missing from the text.

Public relations instructors will appreciate how thoroughly the text is grounded in strategic communication contexts This aids both student understanding and buy-in. The text never gets far from the practice of professional communicators, which is not just helpful for the aforementioned reasons but also to avoid impractical or dogmatic prescriptions for the right way to do research.

Critique

Causal Inference

As a user of this textbook to teach an undergraduate public relations methods course for three semesters at the time of writing, the most serious weakness of the textbook in my experience is its handling of causal inference. The concept is almost entirely unmentioned and when it is, it is done so in a way that makes it a rare case of the text being overly superficial, stating “an experiment is the only method that can determine cause and effect” (p. 37). Understanding what it means for one thing

to cause another and, more importantly, how we determine causality is essential to both conducting, evaluating, and consuming social research. The fact that this is difficult to do, especially in applied communication contexts, is all the more reason to emphasize the issue.

This topic deserves a chapter unto itself in the first part of the book as a "foundation" of research methods. Students should be asking themselves often about the plausibility of a causal relationship and the extent to which a given research design provides causal evidence. Although there are worse forms of advice than to simply outsource causal inference to experimental designs, readers will struggle to appreciate just how important it is that experiments are so well-suited to causal inference without more background information. In my courses, I have resorted to excerpting a chapter from another general social science textbook to bridge this content gap.

Minor Matters

Although the content breadth and quick pace are listed as strengths, that does come at some cost. The text helpfully bolds and colors terms that are key concepts, which can be referenced in a glossary later on. At times, though, readers may feel overwhelmed with the sheer number of these in a short span. One standout example is a single page in the data analytics chapter with 11 such key concepts. The page after it introduces 6 more and yet another 9 over the following 2 pages. This is not a serious problem, but instructors will want to watch out for this and perhaps warn or coach their students on which concepts are most important.

Publisher-provided slide decks are organized by chapter and follow best practices by minimizing prose and text, emphasizing visuals and single major points per slide instead. Some instructors may find these helpful, but such sparse slides can be relatively difficult to use when the instructor is not the one who made them. A test bank, also organized by chapter, is sufficient in quality but low on quantity.

Conclusion

Strategic Communication Research Methods largely achieves what it sets out to do, covering the broad array of research methods that strategic communicators may use or otherwise encounter in their work. In settings where students are aspiring public relations professionals or entering related fields, the textbook's examples and explanations fit like a glove. Its approach should cultivate an educated, but not cynical, research consumer. Those who are attuned to these issues will find the textbook lacking in its handling of causal inference, an important but not deal-breaking limitation. The book's structure manages to be opinionated — in a good way — without limiting instructor freedom to omit or re-order their lessons.

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Book Review

Strategic Communications for PR, Social Media and Marketing (8th ed.)

Reviewed by
Betsy Emmons, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Authors: Laurie J. Wilson, Joseph D. Ogden, & Christopher E. Wilson
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https://he.kendallhunt.com/product/strategic-communications-pr-social-media-and-marketing
Number of pages: 378

Structure and Content

Led by Brigham Young University emeritus professor Laurie Wilson's "Strategic Communications Matrix," the Strategic Communications for PR, Social Media and Marketing textbook guides readers through the chronological process of strategic campaign development. The eight-step matrix is the foundation used throughout the book to explain strategic planning. The matrix demonstrates a complete process of researching, planning, implementing and evaluating a campaign in an easy-to-follow format that is comprehensible for beginning strategists while also relatable to experienced practitioners. The matrix is an adaptation of RACE (research, action, communication, evaluation)/ RPIE (research, planning, implementation, evaluation) campaign planning acronyms which can be hard for students to dissect when moving from tactical to strategic thinking.

Each chapter is subdivided by topic to form the building blocks of strategic communication planning, and chapter introductions include "learning imperatives" that highlight the main points discussed, queuing readers. Case studies and "tips from the pros" segments help highlight main points. "Application cases" are also used so readers can see concepts come to life right away with real examples. The textbook takes a public relations-centric approach to strategic planning, wherein key publics are at the heart of strategic planning before central campaign themes are identified. Chapter 6, "Key Publics and Primary Messages," has a thorough guide to help readers understand how to identify key publics and the personal motivations that strategic communications can assist with. Self-interests behind communication messages, opinion leaders, and likely channels to use to reach key publics are explained in smart detail so that determining effective strategies makes sense.

Media, persuasion and behavioral theory is introduced to give readers a "why" behind proactive message strategy followed by two

chapters about research, including the importance of research before creating messages and the types of research commonly conducted by strategic communication professionals. Environmental scanning and secondary research are given thorough explanations, and primary research concepts are mentioned and expanded upon; writing surveys, conducting focus groups and message testing is discussed both in case study format and within the chapters.

The "big idea," a concept familiar to advertising and marketing but less so public relations, is incorporated well and in fun ways – exercises are included to generate creative thinking. Brainstorming and outlook-testing are included along with observation and other interactive ideas to view a communication need innovatively. Knowing when a concept blooms into a big idea is also discussed, such as visual representation, slogan, and hashtag. Other more familiar-to-marketing concepts included in the book are the SWOT (strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, threats to organizations) and creative concepting. These are crucial and also practical incorporations with the converged environments modern PR practitioners work within and complement the core public relations concepts educators will recognize.

Channel planning (media to use in message dissemination) is cleverly explained with the "personalization and interactivity grid" that helps readers think through how individualized media fulfill certain strategic aims. The PESO (paid, earned, shared, owned) media model, a necessity in discussing PR media strategy, is incorporated here and subdivided into controlled and uncontrolled media. The gatekeeper concept is explained along with helpful graphs to subdivide tactics into the proper media channel and interactivity level. The interactivity and personalization options listed in the "shared media" explanation of social media use are helpful – students learn how different social media posts

achieve different strategic aims. The illustrated figures of media channel tactic ideas are easy to incorporate into a lecture and create class examples from. It would also be easy to use the illustrations in real time in class, having students look up social media accounts or owned media of different brands and explain what the strategic purpose was (or might have been) in the content.

Up-to-date discussions of the latest strategies in social media and digital media abound. Examples include livestreaming, artificial intelligence, social media influencers and multi-platform social media use. Other timely topics such as TikTok as news source, newsjacking, native advertising and social media's value as part of a media relations strategy are included. The book is thorough in explaining the ways media help define the strategic plan and when sponsored posts or influencer marketing are most beneficial.

The easy-to-understand strategic communications matrix is embedded into each applicable area of the textbook but especially comes to life in the calendar and budgeting chapter (Chapter 10). Tactics are systematically aligned under key publics and strategies with a chronological implementation method using Gantt charts that make visualizing a campaign process seamless. Also included is a suggested budget add-on to each tactic so tabulating tactic cost is easy. While marketing often prioritizes budgeting within strategic plans, public relations often treats it as a secondary concern and less important than earned media strategies; the reality the book well explains is that sometimes careful advertising expenses enhance strategies in impactful ways.

Using the Barcelona Principles, the authors argue for public relations professionals to be proactive with campaign measurement and evaluation. A four-prong system of measurement including outputs (e.g. social media posts, news stories), outtakes (e.g. online engagement,

downloads), outcomes (e.g. trust, advocacy), and impact (achievement of communication goals) was explained in a "mini case" from Global Development Bank in the evaluation chapter. A common (and valid) complaint is that public relations strategic efforts are not always immediate – the relationship-building work of PR evolves over time, sometimes months and years. The bank's mini case stood out as a helpful option for measuring sometimes nebulous public opinion formation outcomes to at least set a foundation for more long-term desired outcomes like stakeholders becoming advocates for a brand.

Finally, an under-developed area of strategic communication textbooks is in-depth discussion of presentations. The differences among pitch decks, research presentations, persuasive presentation and "TED Talk" style presentations are discussed in Chapter 13 along with helpful tips for preparing for each. Public speaking best practices and troubleshooting for technology concerns like projector nuances are even included, which demonstrates how practical the textbook is for helping students through every aspect of the strategic campaign process.

Contribution to Public Relations Education

Strategic planning is often tricky to teach to PR students in an accessible way as the process involves complex variables and several parts of varying prioritization and importance. Wilson's Strategic Communication Matrix is a useful method to break the campaign process into manageable segments that students would be able to identify with and build upon. The textbook also honors the converged integrated marketing communications landscape that most professionals work within. Job titles and strategic aims overlap in modern marketing and public relations, so the integrated approach taught here is beneficial. At the same time, the authors also signal when strategies align more acutely with what a public relations professional would need to pay close attention to, making sure to note that marketing and public relations serve different purposes within an organization.

Inclusions or Omissions

This textbook can serve as a one-stop-shop explanation of the strategic communication planning process in all main aspects. The critiques noted here are ancillary to the main contributions of the textbook but noted as options for augmenting coursework or course structure as needed.

Issues management and crisis management were both introduced but would benefit from further explanation of the differences between the two and examples of how organizations manage issues to avoid crises. Risk communication along with issues management is an increasing area of importance in modern public relations careers which help augment crisis plans.

The book's final chapter, Chapter 14, addresses ethics, professionalism and diversity. Parameters of ethical behavior in the workplace are discussed, including pointers for acknowledging and appreciating diversity. The end of this chapter includes action items like watching a PRSA diversity video but does not offer a case study about diversity, one of the few concepts without a case study or external professional's tip. Some examples in other parts of the text mention diversity, so tying them to this area would be an easy add. The chapter also could be moved toward the earlier part of the book so considering ethics, professionalism and diversity is a more prominent pre-cursor to campaign development.

Reader Expertise or Knowledge Required

Upper-level undergraduate students and graduate students would benefit most from this text. The text quickly moves from reasons that strategic communication helps drive trust and business culture into theory and research. Persuasive writing and creative design are discussed but not given extensive attention – a reader would need to already have coursework in basic media writing, knowledge of creative principles and

familiarity with common PR tactics. Marketing students without basic media courses would need to backfill knowledge of public relations and media creation fundamentals but would find the planning process, especially in the Matrix format, applicable and useful.

Conclusion

The book is an accessible and useful option for public relations or integrated marketing communications strategy courses. It could serve as a single-semester textbook or be kept as a useful reference for capstone campaign projects. The timely examples and extra attention given to explaining the most recent aspects of social media and digital media keep this 8th edition fresh and relevant for current students.

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