

# Spin or Professionalism: How the Public Views Public Relations Due to Dissemination Method and Motive of the Organization

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## ABSTRACT

The public relations profession has evolved to have high ethical standards. However, many people still have a negative perception of the profession. Public relations professionals use a variety of communication tactics and are often responsible for managing or promoting corporate social responsibility activities. The purpose of this research was to see how the public perceives public relations by examining dissemination methods and motives of the organization. Participants read an article about a public relations scenario at a fictitious company that included information about one of two dissemination methods (traditional news release or social media) and one of three motives (altruistic, selfish, or mixed) and completed a questionnaire that asked their opinion about the scenario in the article and public relations in general. Participants rated the public relations practitioner as less professional when social media was used. There were few differences due to assigned motive of the organization. However, there were many differences due to perceived motive of the organization. This research demonstrates that perception of motive can be more important than the actual motive. Future research should attempt to replicate these findings in real world public relations situations.

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the profession, the field of public relations has been viewed negatively by some members of the public, believing the terms “spin,” “propaganda,” and “public relations” can be used interchangeably. Some people find the profession to be manipulative or deceitful. They believe the profession is about “spinning” stories to enhance the image of an organization at the expense of many others (Miller & Dinan, 2008). This negative perception of public relations may be due to historical factors and the past actions of some practitioners.

Although the term public relations did not come into use until the 1920s, its history begins long before that time. Some historians believe that the earliest origins of public relations date back hundreds or even thousands of years (Broom, 2009). However, public relations began to take shape as a profession in the late 1800s. P. T. Barnum and his circuses became well known because of his ability to promote the

events through what became known as press agency. He staged events in the city where the circus was to perform to gain media attention, finding that media coverage was more effective than traditional advertising (Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2009; Broom).

In 1904, Ivy Lee and George Parker opened one of the first public relations firms in the United States (Cutlip, 1994; Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2009; Broom, 2009). Although the Publicity Bureau, the first publicity agency in the United States, opened four years earlier, it is little discussed in the history of public relations as it only lasted 12 years (Cutlip; Broom). Lee, a man considered to be one of the founding fathers of public relations, encouraged his clients to be accessible, rather than secretive, with reporters. He helped restore the image of the Rockefellers after violence and union issues at a mine in Colorado (Bobbitt & Sullivan). However, he is recorded as having been less than truthful with facts during the press coverage of a mining accident, shifting blame from the company he represented to a third party (Miller & Dinan, 2008). Edward Bernays, a former propagandist for the Committee on Public Information during World War I, ran an influential public relations firm for corporate clients with his wife Doris Fleishman beginning in the 1920s (Bobbitt & Sullivan; Broom). They are credited with coining the phrase public relations to replace previously used terms that no longer reflected the entirety of what their developing profession did (Bobbitt & Sullivan). However, like Lee, Bernays is also credited for actions that may not be considered ethical today. In his work with tobacco companies, he tried to break the negative stigma of women smoking by linking women’s rights and freedoms to smoking by creating an event where a group of ordinary women smoked on a busy public street. News and photos of the event quickly spread across the country. Unbeknownst to the media and women involved, the event was staged (Miller & Dinan).

Since the early days of the profession, the standard methods of practitioners have changed to be more ethical. Arthur Page, former vice president of AT&T during the 1930s and 1940s, developed seven principles of public relations. Among other items on the list, Page lists “tell the truth,” “prove it with action,” and “realize a company’s true character is expressed by its people” (Broom, 2009). According to Page, public relations should demonstrate the true nature of an organization with honesty. If the true nature of the organization is not something it would want publicized, the organization needs to change instead of creating a dishonest message. Today, professional societies, such as the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), publish codes of ethics and standards (IABC, 2012; PRSA, 2000). These codes encourage members to act professionally and ethically during the course of their work. They advise practitioners to serve the public, be honest and timely with their communication, and promote the free flow of information (Broom; Smith, 2008).

In today’s business environment, it is common for organizations and public relations practitioners with high professionalism to value corporate social responsibility and work to benefit their stakeholders and advance society as a whole

through their actions (Benn et al., 2010; Capriotti & Moreno, 2007; Soo-Yeon & Reber, 2009). Public relations professionals are often a driving force behind implementing and creating awareness of these socially responsible actions in their organizations. This helps the reputation of the field because it shows that public relations is truly about honesty and improving relationships with stakeholders and not about disguising wrongdoing (Broom, 2009). For example, Johnson & Johnson responded to a severe nursing shortage in 2001 by creating a multi-year campaign to encourage individuals to pursue a career in nursing and recruit more nursing faculty (Bobbitt & Sullivan, 2009). The company did not directly benefit from the campaign, but implemented it to benefit society as a whole.

However, organizations need to be careful not to use socially responsible actions for selfish reasons. Sallot (2002) conducted research on what the public thinks about public relations by examining the motives of the organization, communication style, and professionalism of the practitioner in a factorial experiment. This study showed that participants had a more negative view of public relations when the organization had selfish motives. Members of the public may find that the selfishly motivated socially responsible actions are fake and clutter communication channels with more publicity stunts (Broom, 2009). If an organization is being socially responsible to benefit society and not disguise previous bad actions, the public will have more positive views of the field of public relations. Advances in ethics, professionalism, and social responsibility are slowly helping to improve the reputation of the field of public relations. Perceptions, however, are slow to change and are influenced by a variety of factors.

The definition of public relations is frequently debated and ever evolving. Practitioners, the public, and even other members of a practitioner's organization may have very different ideas of public relations. Most agree that public relations practitioners are responsible for disseminating information to the public and managing the impression of their organizations. For the sake of this study, public relations is defined as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends" (Broom, 2009).

The key element to the modern practice of public relations is managing mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholder groups. To effectively create and manage these relationships with stakeholders, public relations practitioners need to understand what stakeholders value in a relationship with an organization. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) identified five key dimensions of successful organization-public relationships. The dimensions are trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. Trust is the degree to which the public believes the organization does what it says it will do. Openness is the degree to which the organization shares its plans for the future with the public. Involvement is how much the organization allows and encourages its employees to be involved in the welfare of the community. Investment is the organization's financial investment into the welfare of the

community. Commitment is the long-term dedication and commitment the organization has to the community. These dimensions are the cornerstone of managing relationships with the public and the effective practice of modern public relations.

To help build and develop these relationships, public relations practitioners communicate with their stakeholders in a variety of different ways. Traditionally, practitioners used print media to communicate with their stakeholders. Practitioners would write a news release and submit it to a newspaper in the hopes that it would be published. With the advent of radio and television broadcasting, practitioners began to distribute news releases to these media organizations as well. With the dawning of the Digital Age, new media are challenging previously used forms of communication and traditional media no longer has singular power to influence the public (Sharma et al., 2012; Meraz, 2011). Traditional media, such as newspapers, television, and radio, presented one uniform message to all audiences. New media, including social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, combine text, sound, and images in an interactive format (Sharma et al., 2012). Social media gives more power to ordinary people, as audiences are able to create and distribute content instead of just receiving it (Dilenschneider, 2011; Stefanone et al., 2010). Social media allows stakeholders to better engage in two-way communication with the organization (Păun, 2009). This leads many practitioners to believe that social media results in enhanced relationships between organizations and stakeholders. However, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that social media use actually improves relationships between organizations and their publics (Taylor & Kent, 2010).

Properly integrating and using social media is a new challenge for public relations professionals, as sometimes the medium chosen for communication can have more impact on the effectiveness of communication than the message itself (Păun, 2009; Schultz et al., 2011). Practitioners must not abandon traditional media for new media options before research shows that new media strategies actually enhance relationships. Social media is not the best way to communicate to every audience (Dilenschneider, 2011). Age, for example, is negatively correlated with use of social networking sites (Stefanone et al., 2010). While social media may be an effective way to communicate with a younger demographic, older audiences may not receive messages from new media channels because they are not active users (Taylor & Kent, 2010). In many cases, it is best to use both new and traditional media within a campaign to reach multiple stakeholder groups (Dilenschneider).

While Sallot (2002) examined how the motive of the organization affects how the public views the profession of public relations, the study did not examine how motive affects relationship management—the most crucial aspect of modern public relations. The purpose of this study is to see how the public perceives the relationship of an organization with the community and how the public perceives the profession of public relations when dissemination methods and motives of the organization are manipulated. It is expected that participants will rate the public

relations profession and practitioner more favorably when there is an altruistic motive than a selfish motive. It is expected that participants will rate the organization higher on relationship dimensions when there is an altruistic motive than a selfish motive. It is expected that the ratings for the public relations profession and practitioner will be more favorable when information is disseminated through a traditional news release than when through social media. It is also expected that the ratings for relationship dimensions will be higher when information is disseminated through a traditional news release than when through social media. It is expected that participants with public relations majors will have a more positive perception of the public relations profession and the practitioner in the scenario than participants with business majors or other majors; it is expected that participants with business majors will have a more positive perception of public relations than those with other majors. The aim of this research was to develop a deeper understanding of what people think about public relations and the motives and message distribution methods used by practitioners.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The participants were surveyed in undergraduate psychology, social sciences, business, and communication courses at Capital University, a medium-sized comprehensive university in Ohio. There were 249 participants in this study: 125 participants received the social media method and 124 received the news release dissemination method; 84 received the selfish motive, 85 received the mixed motive, and 80 received the altruistic motive. Participants reported belonging to the following racial groups: 201 Caucasian, 19 African American, 6 Hispanic, 4 Asian, 14 multi-racial, and 3 as a race not listed on the survey. Two participants did not respond. Participants reported having a major belonging to the following categories: 17 public relations, 93 business, and 139 other majors/undecided/did not respond. The sample was comprised of 100 males and 149 females. The mean age of the participants was 19.41(1.39) years.

### *Materials*

The article the participants read was adapted from research by Sallot (2002) and began with the following information for all participants:

The Tru-Data Corporation is a leading manufacturer of laser printers and print cartridges in the United States. Its printers and print cartridges are sold in most national office supply stores. The company has five manufacturing facilities throughout the United States and is headquartered in Springfield, Illinois. It employs over 800 people around the country. Janet Thompson, the head of the Tru-Data Corporation public relations department, just announced a new plan to launch a local print cartridge recycling program. The program will first be launched in Springfield, Illinois, and will then be

expanded to other cities. The goal of the program is to have citizens recycle their print cartridges at area drop off locations instead of putting them in the garbage and having them end up in a landfill.

Each story included one of two dissemination methods (social media or news release) and one of three motives (altruistic, selfish, or mixed). Participants in the social media condition read the following:

This plan was announced via social media. Janet Thompson posted a story on Tru-Data Corporation's Facebook page about the program. She posted "Tru-Data Corporation is excited to start its new print cartridge recycling program" on its Facebook and Twitter and included a link to its website where additional details about the program could be found.

Participants in the news release condition read the following:

This plan was announced via news release. Janet Thompson wrote a news release about the details of the program and submitted it to the Springfield Times. The news release was printed on the second page of the Wednesday morning paper.

Participants in the altruistic condition read the following:

The Tru-Data Corporation launched this program because several Tru-Data executives personally support environmental conservation and the company wants to make a positive contribution to society.

Participants in the selfish condition read the following:

The Tru-Data Corporation launched this program because Tru-Data planned a commercial laser cartridge recycling subsidiary and the local program would guarantee raw material and profitability.

Participants in the mixed motive condition read the following:

The Tru-Data Corporation launched this program because the program would enhance the company's reputation and potentially increase profits, while serving social interests and helping the environment.

The questionnaire asked demographic questions about sex, age, race, major, and whether the subject was an undergraduate or graduate student. The questionnaire then asked the participants to rate the following statements about the

company in the article, the public relations professional in the article, and the profession of public relations on Likert-type scales: Janet Thompson is trustworthy. Janet Thompson is deceitful. Janet Thompson is professional. Janet Thompson acted ethically. Janet Thompson is an effective public relations practitioner. Janet Thompson's actions are typical of public relations practitioners. Tru-Data Corporation does what it says it will do. Tru-Data Corporation shares plans for the future with the public. Tru-Data Corporation's employees are involved in the welfare of the community. Tru-Data Corporation is financially invested in the welfare of the community. Tru-Data Corporation has long-term commitment to the welfare of the community. Public relations is a manipulative field. The practice of public relations is ethical. This article is a typical example of how public relations is conducted. The final item on the questionnaire asked participants to rate the motivation of the organization as selfish, mixed, or altruistic. The questionnaire was based on research conducted by Sallot (2002) and Ledingham and Bruning (1998). Reliability and validity data are not available.

#### *Procedure*

Participants were surveyed during regular class meetings of psychology, social sciences, business, and communication courses. Each participant read an article about a public relations situation at Tru-Data Corporation, a fictitious company, and completed a questionnaire about his or her perception of the company in the article and public relations. The six variations of the article (news release/altruistic, news release/mixed, news release/selfish, social media/altruistic, social media/mixed, and social media/selfish) were distributed randomly to participants.

### **RESULTS**

A two-way ANOVA for between subjects design was conducted for each of the fourteen Likert scale test questions to see if there was a main effect for or interaction between dissemination method and motive of the organization. For the statement "Janet Thompson is professional," there was a main effect for dissemination method,  $F(1, 242) = 9.05, p = .00, \eta^2 = .04$ . Participants in the news release condition rated the statement higher than participants in the social media condition. For the statement "Janet Thompson acted ethically," there was a main effect for motive,  $F(2, 242) = 3.31, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive conditions ( $p = .02$ ), but there was no difference between selfish and altruistic conditions ( $p = .11$ ) and mixed and altruistic conditions ( $p = .79$ ). Participants in the mixed condition rated the statement significantly higher than participants in the selfish condition. For the statement "Tru-Data Corporation is financially invested in the welfare of the community," there was a main effect for motive,  $F(2, 243) = 2.61, p = .04, \eta^2 = .03$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and altruistic motive conditions ( $p = .08$ ), but there was no difference between selfish and mixed conditions ( $p = .99$ ) and mixed

and altruistic conditions ( $p = .11$ ). Participants in the altruistic condition rated the statement higher than participants in the selfish condition. All other main effects and interactions for dissemination method and motive were not significant.

Chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine if participants' perception of the motive of the organization matched the motive that they were given. There was a difference between the perception of the motive and the motive the participant was given,  $\chi^2(2, 249) = 181.91, p = .00$ . Because there was a difference between the perception the participants had about the motive of the organization and the motive they were given, a two-way ANOVA for between subjects design was conducted for each of the fourteen Likert scale test questions to see if there was a main effect for or interaction between dissemination method and perceived motive of the individual, the organization, and the field of public relations.

#### *Motive of the Individual*

For the statement "Janet Thompson is trustworthy," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 239) = 8.81, p = .00, \eta^2 = .07$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .05$ ), selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .00$ ), and mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .01$ ). Participants who perceived a selfish motive rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed or altruistic. Participants who perceived the motive as mixed rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as altruistic. For the statement "Janet Thompson is deceitful," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 236) = 4.70, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between altruistic and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .03$ ), but there was no difference between selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .11$ ) and mixed and selfish perceptions ( $p = .61$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as altruistic rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed. For the statement "Janet Thompson acted ethically," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 237) = 11.49, p = .00, \eta^2 = .09$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .00$ ) and selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .00$ ), but there was no difference between mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .13$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as selfish rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed or altruistic. For the statement "Janet Thompson is an effective public relations practitioner," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 233) = 4.65, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .04$ ) and selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .01$ ), but there was no difference between mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .49$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as selfish rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed or altruistic. For the statement "Janet Thompson's actions are typical of public relations practitioners,"

there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 236) = 3.22, p = .04, \eta^2 = .03$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .04$ ), but there was no difference between selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .09$ ) and mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .85$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as selfish rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed.

#### *Motive of the Organization*

For the statement "Tru-Data Corporation does what it says it will do," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 239) = 6.58, p = .00, \eta^2 = .05$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .02$ ) and selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .00$ ), but there was no difference between mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .19$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as selfish rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed or altruistic. For the statement "Tru-Data Corporation shares plans for the future with the public," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 234) = 17.94, p = .00, \eta^2 = .13$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .00$ ), selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .00$ ), and mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .02$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as selfish rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed or altruistic. Participants who perceived the motive as mixed rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as altruistic. For the statement "Tru-Data Corporation's employees are involved in the welfare of the community," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 238) = 9.13, p = .00, \eta^2 = .07$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .00$ ) and selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .00$ ), but there was no difference between mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .17$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as selfish rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed or altruistic. There was an interaction between dissemination method and perceived motive,  $F(2, 238) = 5.14, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . For the statement "Tru-Data Corporation is financially invested in the welfare of the community," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 240) = 6.11, p = .00, \eta^2 = .05$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .01$ ), but there was no difference between selfish and mixed perceptions ( $p = .13$ ) and mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .60$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as selfish rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as altruistic. There was an interaction between dissemination method and perceived motive,  $F(2, 240) = 5.10, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . For the statement "Tru-Data Corporation has long-term commitment to the welfare of the community," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 240) = 9.80, p = .00, \eta^2 = .08$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and

altruistic perceptions ( $p = .00$ ) and mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .00$ ), but there was no difference between selfish and mixed perceptions ( $p = .09$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as altruistic rated the statement significantly higher than participants who perceived the motive as selfish or mixed.

#### *Motive of the Field of Public Relations*

For the statement "Public relations is a manipulative field," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 238) = 6.26, p = .00, \eta^2 = .05$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .01$ ), but there was no difference between selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .10$ ) and selfish and mixed perceptions ( $p = .71$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as mixed rated the statement significantly higher than participants who perceived the motive as altruistic. There was an interaction between dissemination method and perceived motive,  $F(2, 238) = 7.19, p = .00, \eta^2 = .06$ . For the statement "The practice of public relations is ethical," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 238) = 3.08, p = .48, \eta^2 = .03$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .04$ ), but there was no difference between selfish and mixed conditions ( $p = .06$ ) and mixed and altruistic conditions ( $p = .85$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as altruistic rated the statement significantly higher than participants who perceived the motive as selfish. For the statement "This article is a typical example of how public relations is conducted," there was a main effect for perceived motive,  $F(2, 239) = 4.35, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a significant difference between selfish and mixed motive perceptions ( $p = .02$ ) and selfish and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .01$ ), but there was no difference between mixed and altruistic perceptions ( $p = .80$ ). Participants who perceived the motive as selfish rated the statement significantly lower than participants who perceived the motive as mixed or altruistic. All other main effects and interactions for dissemination method and perceived motive were not significant.

A one-way ANOVA for between subjects design was conducted for each of the fourteen Likert scale test questions to see if there was a difference due to major. For the statement "Tru-Data Corporation's employees are involved in the welfare of the community," there was a difference due to major,  $F(2, 244) = 3.02, p = .05, \eta^2 = .02$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a difference between public relations majors and other (not public relations or business) majors ( $p = .05$ ), but there was no difference between public relations majors and business majors ( $p = .10$ ) and business and other majors ( $p = .94$ ). Public relations majors rated the statement higher than other majors. For the statement "Public relations is a manipulative field," there was a difference due to major,  $F(2, 244) = 3.79, p = .02, \eta^2 = .03$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a difference between public relations majors and other majors ( $p = .04$ ), but there was no difference between public relations majors and business majors ( $p = .25$ ) and business and other majors ( $p = .34$ ). Public relations majors rated the statement lower than other majors. For the statement "The practice of public relations is ethical," there

was a difference due to major,  $F(2, 244) = 4.68, p = .01, \eta^2 = .04$ . Scheffe's test showed there was a difference between public relations and business majors ( $p = .01$ ) and public relations majors and other majors ( $p = .02$ ), but there was no difference between business and other majors ( $p = .86$ ). Public relations majors rated the statement higher than business majors and other majors. All other differences due to major were not significant.

### DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that participants would rate the public relations profession and practitioner more favorably when there was an altruistic motive than a selfish motive was not supported. However, when perceived motive was examined, the hypothesis was partially supported. Participants who perceived the motive as altruistic rated the public relations practitioner as more trustworthy, ethical, and effective than participants who perceived the motive as selfish. Participants who perceived the motive as altruistic rated the public relations profession as more ethical and the scenario as more typical than participants who perceived the motive as selfish.

The hypothesis that participants would rate the organization higher on relationship dimensions when there was an altruistic motive than a selfish motive was partially supported. Participants rated the company as being more financially invested in the community when they received an altruistic motive than a selfish motive. No other items supported this hypothesis. However, when perceived motive was examined, there was more support for the hypothesis. Participants who perceived the motive as altruistic rated the company as more trustworthy, open, involved, financially invested, and committed to the community than participants who perceived the motive as selfish.

The hypothesis that the ratings for the public relations profession and practitioner would be more favorable when information was disseminated through a traditional news release than when through social media was partially supported. Participants rated the public relations professional significantly more professional when the information was disseminated by news release rather than social media. However, the hypothesis was not supported for any other items. The hypothesis that the ratings for relationship dimensions would be higher when information was disseminated through a traditional news release than when through social media was not supported. There were no differences due to dissemination method for any of the relationship dimensions. These results suggest there is no difference in critical elements of the public's relationship with the organization due to the choice to use social media or a traditional news release when a single piece of information is disseminated.

The hypothesis that participants with public relations majors would have a more positive perception of the public relations profession and the practitioner in the scenario than participants with business majors or other majors was partially supported. Public relations majors rated the public relations profession as less

manipulative than other majors and more ethical than business majors and other majors. The hypothesis that participants with business majors would have a more positive perception of public relations than those with other majors was not supported. There was no difference between business majors and other majors (not public relations or business) majors for any item. These results suggest that business majors and other majors have similar opinions about the field of public relations.

The finding that the organization's motivation affected the public's impression of the field of public relations was supported by the previous research of Sallot (2002). For the impression of the field to continue to improve, practitioners must diligently work with their organizations to be truthful and work for the public good. The results of this study also showed that a person's perception can be more important than the actual intention of the organization. The motive of the organization only impacted one relationship dimension, but perceived motive impacted all of five relationship dimensions. Because of this finding, public relations professionals should not only encourage their organizations to engage in socially responsible activities, but they should also work to effectively communicate their actions and altruistic motives to the public. The finding that participants rated the scenario to be more typical when they perceived the motive as altruistic is not supported by Miller and Dinan (2008), who discussed public relations as an incredibly unethical field. If the participants in the current study shared the opinion of Miller and Dinan (2008), they would not have found an altruistic motive to be more typical and instead would have felt a selfish motive was more typical. However, it is a positive sign for the field of public relations that altruistic motives are considered more typical than selfish motives.

The finding that there was no difference in relationship due to dissemination method is consistent with previous research. Taylor and Kent (2010) found that public relations groups often over-estimate the impact of communicating through social media. The current study surveyed college students, a younger demographic that is more likely to be users of social media (Stefanone et al., 2010). Even when studying a population typically targeted by social media tactics, there was no difference in relationship between news release and social media communication. Public relations practitioners should be cautioned to avoid overreliance on social media. Additionally, the results showed that public relations practitioners are considered more professional when they communicate via news release rather than social media. If practitioners are trying to advance the profession and gain credibility, they should think carefully about the role social media has in their communication plans.

The finding that public relations majors view the field as less manipulative and more ethical than others is not surprising. People are likely to believe the field they have chosen is honest. However, the finding that business majors did not find the field of public relations more ethical than other majors or equally as ethical as public relations majors is discouraging to the advancement of the field. Business students and public relations students are likely to be colleagues upon graduation. The public

relations profession needs to be respected and valued by people in the business community for the field to continue to advance.

There were some limitations to this study. First, the scenario only described the dissemination of a single piece of information. In an actual public relations situation, it is likely that it would only be a single tactic that is a part of a larger campaign or the company's overall communications strategy. Participants may have had a different impression of the field of public relations or rated the relationship dimensions differently if they had viewed an entire campaign. Second, this study only asked participants to read a short article about a public relations scenario. They did not actually experience the communication tactic. Participants may have had a different opinion of the scenario if it was a real communication piece coming from a real organization in their daily lives. Third, the participants in this study were all college students. This limits the generalizability of the study because people of other age groups and socioeconomic backgrounds may have different views of public relations. Future research should analyze the impact of dissemination method and motive of the organization on relationship dimensions during a real-world public relations campaign on a wider audience.

In conclusion, the study indicated that the motive of an organization affects the public's impression of public relations. Perceived motive of the organization impacts the organization's relationship with the public and can be more important than the actual motive of the organization. There was no difference in relationship with the public between traditional or social media dissemination methods, suggesting that practitioners should avoid overreliance on social media. There is evidence that the perception of the field of public relations has improved since the early days of the profession, as altruistic motives were rated as more typical than selfish motives. However, there is more room for improvement in the perception of the field as people outside of the field rate it as less ethical than future practitioners.

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