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PUBLIC AWARENESS OF PR: MEASURING CITIZENS' COMPREHENSION OF THE
INFLUENCE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
MIA HAMMOND

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

14 April 2023

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**Public Awareness of PR: Measuring Citizens' Comprehension of the Influence
of Public Relations**

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14 April, 2023

Abstract

Through its circulation of culturally relevant messaging, the field of public relations has established itself as an omnipresent force that “both intervenes in and instrumentali[z]es different aspects of society and culture” (Edwards, 2018). Despite public relations’ role as a socio-cultural decider, there has been limited academic exploration of public relations within the field of media literacy. Considering the influential nature of public relations, there are negative implications surrounding a lack of general comprehension of the field at both the individual-consumer level as well as at the national level (i.e., the health of American democracy). This thesis seeks to bring public relations literacy, a term coined by Holladay and Coombs (2013), to the forefront of academic consideration by gauging American adults’ average comprehension of public relations tactics. In a survey assessing 185 adults, results suggested that U.S. adults lack public relations literacy compared to advertising literacy, a notable finding considering that advertising literacy frequently appears in media literacy discourse whereas public relations literacy does not. The results of this study provide foundation for the necessary discussion of public relations literacy in future research.

Keywords: media literacy, public relations literacy, survey, U.S. adults, corporate public relations

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Introduction

The practice of public relations has become ubiquitous in modern society, particularly with the rise of digital media. From media/journalist relations, reputation management, event planning, crisis communication, and social media content creation (just to name a few of the obligations of public relations practitioners), public relations serves many functions, all of which are deeply embedded in the common culture and function of American society. In order to assist the “strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (“About Public Relations,” n.d.), practitioners must fully understand their publics and the environments in which they exist. Therefore, public relations professionals are often adept at identifying social and cultural trends and integrating this knowledge into their strategies and messaging.

Through its circulation of culturally relevant messaging, the field of public relations has established itself as an omnipresent force that “both intervenes in and instrumentaliz[es] different aspects of society and culture” (Edwards, 2018). While public relations practitioners are largely aware of the behaviors and tendencies of their intended audiences, it is unclear if audiences are able to distinguish and criticize the public relations messages they consume. Holladay and Coombs (2013) have suggested that public relations is widely misinterpreted by society, and have called for “public relations literacy” as a subset of media literacy. In order to bring public relations literacy to the forefront of academic and societal consideration, it is first necessary to gauge the general public’s knowledge of public relations and its influence in society.

Literature Review

Public Relations and its Impact on Journalism

Public relations exists as a powerful force in modern society, particularly for its vast influence on the field of journalism. According to research conducted by Muck Rack (2022), 80% of journalists report that a quarter or more of their stories originate from PR pitches. With the decline of the journalism field, there is growing pressure on journalists to produce more stories at a faster rate (Cision, 2022), which implies that journalists may rely more heavily on public relations pitches in the coming years. Oftentimes, public relations practitioners will prepare press releases in a way that can be “run word-for-word” by journalists (LLoyd & Toogood, 2015)—with the growing pressure on the journalism industry, one can assume that practitioners will have an increased ability to influence what appears in the news. Considering that journalism has a correlative relationship with the health and function of American democracy (political engagement declines with the decline of journalism), (Hayes & Lawless, 2021), public relations could have the potential to impact democracy at the individual-consumer level (i.e., individual consumers of news) as well as macro-level (i.e., shifts in national opinion).

Since the inception of the two industries, journalism and public relations have been interconnected with and dependent upon one another. However, with the rise of the Internet and social media, public relations has a new outlet through which it can operate, sometimes without the assistance of journalists. Despite new opportunities for public relations, PR professionals still heavily rely on journalists to disseminate their messaging and positive information about their clients. In fact, many PR agencies intentionally hire former journalists for their unique ability to understand what constitutes a “good story” (LLoyd & Toogood, 2015). The transition of journalists to the public relations field is becoming more common as the journalism field declines. According to the 2019 Bureau of Labor Statistics data as cited by the Washington Post, “PR specialists now outnumber journalists more than 5 to 1,” indicating a growing gap between

the two industries (Izadi, 2021). There are implications for power imbalances as a result of this gap as journalists and PR practitioners “compete on a much more crowded playing field,” although it is uncertain “who will emerge on the winning side” (LLoyd & Toogood, 2015, p. 114). What remains clear, however, is that the two industries remain intertwined.

Public Relations Versus Advertising

With the continuous rise of digital technology along with other societal shifts, promotional efforts have become more systemically absorbed into modern culture (Edwards, 2018). In particular, advancements in technology, geopolitical shifts (such as economic growth and the development of a globally-intertwined economy and free-trade), and an increased focus on environmental issues have been cited as movements that have led to an evolved and more sophisticated marketing mix—one that considers consumers’ greater involvement in the value-creation process and holistically understands its target audiences (Wichmann et al., 2022). Considering promotion’s increasingly prominent and integrative role in society, it becomes necessary to focus on the most powerful and effective promotional tools.

A common promotional tool that typically has less potential impact than public relations is advertising. Public relations can be around 90% more effective than advertising due to the contrasting nature of the fields (Wynne, 2014). While both fields have their merits, public relations holds an advantage over advertising in that it is typically viewed as more credible. In a meta-analytical study conducted by Eisend and Franziska in 2011, results showed that the credibility effect of publicity is about three times as high as that of advertising, although it was demonstrated that advertising was more effective for unknown products and publicity was more suitable for previously known brands or products.

The idea that public relations outperforms advertising in terms of brands with which customers are already familiar has to do with the idea that public relations yields greater power over time. While advertising is a paid form of communication widely focused on the exposure of a product or brand, public relations relies on earned forms of communication to reshape public opinion of a brand. These earned forms of communication fall under the category of earned media, the medium within which public relations practitioners operate. Earned media includes unpaid content generated through organic means. More specifically, earned media is the positive exposure that a brand or company has not created, although public relations practitioners often influence and ensure this coverage for brands/companies. Examples of earned media include story ideas that are pitched to the media, social media campaigns, TV news segments, etc. (“Earned Media vs. Paid Media vs. Owned Media,” n.d.).

Word of Mouth Marketing, or reports that come directly from the consumer, is a particularly important feature of earned media, as it is seen as more credible and consumer-driven. In fact, according to a study conducted by Nielsen, 92% of consumers “say they trust earned media, such as word-of-mouth or recommendations from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising” (“Global Trust in Advertising and Brand Messages,” 2012). Additionally, it was also indicated in the study that consumer-trust in paid advertising messaging is declining (“Global Trust in Advertising and Brand Messages,” 2012).

In contrast to earned media, paid media is content paid for and often created by a brand or company. Examples of traditional outlets for paid media include radio, television, and print, but it is also becoming more common for companies and brands to utilize paid advertising tactics on social media. Sponsorships are a form of paid media as well, along with Pay-per-Click advertising and direct mail (“Earned Media vs. Paid Media vs. Owned Media,” n.d.) Paid media,

while beneficial in targeting certain demographics and spreading awareness, is not associated with the Word-of-Mouth Marketing and credibility of earned media.

Therefore, public relations distinguishes itself from advertising and other promotional tools through its power to circulate lasting sentiment about brands. Through the use of networks, “third party advocates,” and behind-the-scenes efforts, practitioners are able to ensure the flow of their messaging in a way that other promoters cannot (Edwards, 2018). Additionally, in the context of public relations, promotion exists as a strategy to increase the longevity of initial publicity (i.e., strategic promotional campaigns typically follow initial spikes in publicity as a means of publicity preservation) (Heath & Coombs, 2006).

Given the mass circulation of public relations messages and the field’s demonstrated effectiveness, (particularly in comparison to other promotional fields like advertising which are better suited for short-term promotion), one would assume that public relations media literacy would be frequently explored in academia. However, there is a notable lack of literature regarding public relations literacy, and media literacy experts typically focus on advertising resistance and identifying viable journalism rather than methods to resist public relations strategies.

Media Literacy

Discussion of the importance of media literacy can be traced back to the rise of major motion pictures. During this time, K-12 educators began to explore the ways in which film could be utilized as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. However, changing attitudes towards mass media in the 1970s and 1980s led to a growing discussion surrounding modes of media resistance (Hobbs & Jensen, 2009). Currently, media literacy has become more concerned with empowered citizens and the preservation of democracy. The Center for Media Literacy adopted

its official definition of media literacy education from a 1992 meeting of the Aspen Media Literacy Leadership Institute:

Media Literacy is a 21st century approach to education. It provides a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms — from print to video to the Internet. Media literacy builds an understanding of the role of media in society as well as essential skills of inquiry and self-expression necessary for citizens of a democracy (“Media Literacy: A Definition and More,” n.d.).

With the election of Donald Trump in 2018, preservation of democracy became an even more heavily discussed issue due to the emerging concept of “fake news.” Some scholars have sought to implement their own media education, specifically addressing resistance to fake news. In a project-based learning model, the scholar Friesem engaged his students in a truth-seeking media literacy exercise by relying on the literacy competencies established by The Center for Media Literacy: Access, Analyze and Evaluate, Create, Reflect, and Act. He evaluated his students based on these competencies in the context of three types of false information determined by Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics And Public: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Friesem & Gutsche, 2019).

Some media scholars argue that media literacy education is necessary not only to combat fake news, but also so that students may fully understand why the phenomena arose within modern culture. Therefore, there has been a call for an exploration of the history of media in the United States as a part of media literacy education (Mason et al., 2018). Along with calls for history of media education, there has also been increasing concern surrounding fake news among media scholars. With the rise of social media and citizen journalism, a larger number of people receive their news in non-traditional ways: in 2016, it was determined that “81 percent of U.S.

adults get news online, and 62 percent get news from social media” (Ashley, 2019, as cited by Pew Research Center, 2016). In response to this changing information landscape, media literacy has been established as a mode of empowering consumers to “identify and avoid misinformation” (Jolls & Johnsen, 2018).

While there is less emphasis on the effectiveness of media literacy in academic research, media literacy interventions have proven effective in many cases. Through a small-scale news literacy intervention conducted in 2020 targeting American and Indian citizens, it was found that there was “improved discernment between mainstream and false news headlines” among both populations (Guess et al., 2020). In 2022, an intervention targeting older adults and their resilience to fake news improved the sample’s discernment of fake versus true news from “64% pre-intervention to 85% post-intervention” (Moore & Hancock, 2022). Additionally, a meta-analytical study examining over 50 articles found that media literacy interventions are effective and yield positive results across diverse audiences (Jeong et al., 2012).

Along with ideas about preserving democracy and identifying viable journalism, advertising resistance remains the most heavily explored topic within media literacy. The continuous rise of advertising clutter has become a top concern for advertising resistance scholars, who seek to educate consumers on advertising avoidance strategies in an oversaturated market. Advertising literacy is typically divided into four dimensions, including informational literacy, aesthetic literacy, rhetorical literacy, and promotional literacy (Malmelin, 2010). It is worth noting that because adult consumers are becoming increasingly media literate, much of advertising literacy has focused on the education of children, who are less capable of resisting advertising due to their limited life experiences (John, 1999).

However, advertising literacy has proven effective for both children and adults. In a 2020 study conducted by Stanley and Lawson, it was found that a short-term advertising literacy intervention was effective at increasing third and fourth graders' recognition of persuasion in advertising and increased the sample's argument generation skills. Similarly, in another 2020 study, a health-focused advertising intervention strengthened adults' resistance to sugary beverage advertising (Chen et al., 2020).

Despite media literacy's proven effectiveness, only 14 states within the United States mention media literacy within their legislation ("Media Literacy Now," 2020). Not only is media literacy as a broader category underrepresented in education, but public relations research and public relations literacy are also widely unexplored in media literacy research. Many media literacy interventions have made inroads (specifically in news literacy and advertising literacy), yet public relations literacy has yet to achieve the same success due to its lack of presence within academia. What remains unknown, that would potentially situate public relations in the context of media literacy, is how best to measure an audience's understanding of public relations tactics.

Lack of Awareness of Public Relations

Due to the lack of scholarship surrounding public relations literacy as well as the lack of media literacy education overall in the United States, it can be assumed that the general public does not have the adequate knowledge to understand public relations messages. Thus far, there has been little investigation into how much the general public knows about public relations and its role in modern society.

However, there has been a definition of public relations literacy established by public relations scholars Holladay and Coombs. In their article regarding critical consumers of public relations, Holladay and Coombs (2013) propose that "to be public relations literate, a person

must be able to identify when public relations is being utilized, be aware public relations does impact society and individuals, have frameworks for analyzing public relations efforts, and apply critical thinking skills to their evaluation” (p. 127). They argue that this type of literacy is necessary due to the “unseen” nature of public relations. Because public relations practices tend to be covert, consumers are often unaware of the persuasive biases behind public relations messages, which ultimately threatens democratic society.

Holladay and Coombs have established guidelines for what a public relations literacy curriculum must entail. According to their theory, there are three dimensions for targeting public relations literacy: the operational, tactical, and strategic dimensions. The operational dimension “seeks to articulate the primary functions of public relations,” the tactical “focuses on identifying and evaluating information,” and the strategic dimension tackles public relations strategies, “how to identify each strategy, and examples of appropriate and inappropriate uses of the strategies.” The authors give examples of their envisioned curriculum in terms of crisis communication. A few example questions from the curriculum are as follows:

1. Who created this crisis communication message?
2. How does the organization or other crisis communicators benefit from using this crisis response strategy?
3. Who is the intended audience for the crisis response strategies?
4. Whose voices are heard and absent from the crisis response strategies? Do we hear from just the organization or are others represented in the messages?

There has also been a call to implement literacy training in public relations education. To instill ideas of corporate social responsibility and professional ethics in her education plan for her

public relations students, Strauss (2011) utilized the documentary “The Yes Men Fix the World” as a pedagogical tool. The documentary centers around an activist group called the Yes Men, who craft fake public relations messages under the guise of corporate spokespersons. The use of corporate identities services public relations literacy in that it challenges students’ ability to “distinguish between messages created by for-profit and non-profit organizations” (Holladay and Coombs, 2013). Strauss argues that this documentary can expand public relations education beyond just the functions of the industry and can center public relations in the context of ethics and the corporate agenda (Strauss, 2011).

In summary, public relations literacy is a field still in its infancy, which explains why the practice is not well understood among audiences. Oftentimes, the term “public relations” itself is misused, causing discrepancy over which promotional tools constitute public relations. Along with audiences’ limited knowledge of public relations, the practice is typically viewed in a negative light and seen as inherently deceptive (Holladay & Coombs, 2014). In the media, “virtually anything that a corporation or its representatives does may be labeled as ‘public relations’ and treated with suspicion” (Holladay and Coombs, 2014, p.7). Perhaps there are positive implications behind a healthy skepticism of public relations, yet the benefits of this skepticism are null if audiences are incapable of critically analyzing public relations messages or if they are unable to identify public relations strategies.

Critical Theory and Public Relations

Social theory as a means of broadening the understanding of public relations has been explored in recent literature. The Habermasian theory of the public sphere is particularly relevant when discussing public relations literacy due to its consideration of empowered citizens who can critically analyze the messages they are presented with. According to this theory, “the public

sphere...mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer or public opinion...to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities (Habermas, n.d.).” The import placed on the idea of the “public sphere” by Habermas is ultimately to protect the wishes and free-will of private citizens. The sphere acts as a method of interweaving the private and public realms which is often impeded by “large organizations”. In fact, Habermas has denounced public relations and its protection of organizations under the grounds that the practice undermines citizens’ autonomy and ability to engage in critical discussions. According to Habermas, “reaching understanding” is key to upholding the public sphere, an ability that public relations impedes (Ilhen & Fredriksson, 2018).

In the context of upholding Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, consensus-oriented public relations has been identified as a means of promoting understanding among citizens. This theory envisions a more ethical form of public relations in which the practitioner has as much interest in the publics who receive their messages as the clients they service. Consensus-oriented public relations therefore fits the mold of Habermas’ public sphere in that public relations practitioners work to “reach understanding” among all stakeholders. The process of consensus-oriented public relations includes four key components. The first component includes the preparation of relevant facts, which would entail providing journalists with both pros and cons about their clients. The allotment of a discussion is the following component, which includes the support of the flow of discourse between stakeholders such as clients, journalists, and affected publics. The third component includes the evaluation of publics’ attitudes/position on public relations messages, which would be achieved through surveys and interviews. The final

component is the duty of informing affected members on the level of consensus their communication achieved (Ilhen & Fredriksson, 2018).

What consensus-oriented public relations fails to consider is the fact that audiences likely do not possess the necessary media literacy to adequately support this process. The inclusion of public relations literacy within discussion of Habermas' social sphere will augment the feasibility of attaining critical discourse between clients, public relations practitioners, and publics. However, in order to garner scholarly support for the idea of public relations literacy and to encourage the implementation of public relations literacy, it is essential to gauge the public's knowledge of public relations in today's climate.

Research Questions

To work towards centering public relations literacy at the forefront of scholarly discussion, the following questions must be answered:

RQ1: What is the general public's knowledge of the practice of public relations?

RQ2: Are audiences able to distinguish between advertising and public relations tactics?

RQ3: Are audiences aware of public relations' influence on society?

RQ4: Are audiences able to critically analyze PR messages?

To shed light on these questions, a survey will be conducted targeting adults across the United States.

Method

In order to address these research questions, a survey was distributed to individuals ages 18 and older across the United States. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling to achieve a breadth of responses across the nation. The survey consisted of 24 questions, five of which assessed participant demographic information, and the rest of which were open and close-

ended questions designed according to Holladay and Coombs' theory of public relations literacy curriculum. These questions sought to gauge 1) participants' recognition of public relations, 2) if participants are able to distinguish between examples of public relations tactics and advertising, and 3) participants' overall concept of what public relations is and its presence in American society. The survey was released on February 21, 2023 and closed on March 13, 2023. After the survey distribution period, the survey responses were assessed for general knowledge about and definition of public relations, as well as overall public relations literacy. While Holladay and Coombs (2013) largely focus on crisis communication in their proposed curriculum, this survey expands to focus on general corporate messaging—specifically the corporation Coca-Cola's messaging. Some of the questions focused more heavily on the operational dimension, which examines the primary functions of PR, while others address the tactical (identifying and evaluating information) and strategic (persuasive strategies utilized in advocacy) dimensions (Holladay and Coombs, 2013).

Participants

Participants of the survey included 185 adults ages 19-78, without a particularly prominent age demographic. Respondents were largely comprised of white women, with 81.1% of respondents identifying as white and 71.4% identifying as female. Most respondents (35.1%) reported having their Bachelor's degree, along with a notable percentage holding their Master's degree (25.4%), and some respondents holding a PhD (4.9%). 15.1% of respondents reported having completed some college, and only 2.1% of the sample reported only having completed high school/not completing high school. Participants were largely from the Western (31.9%) and Southwestern (23.8%) regions of the United States, while 11.4% resided in the Northeast, 13% resided in the Southeast, and 9.7% reported residence in the Midwest.

Results

RQ1: What is the general public's knowledge of the practice of public relations?

Four of the survey questions addressed RQ1 and Holladay and Coombs' operational dimension of their proposed public relations literacy education. One open-ended question asked respondents to describe the primary functions of public relations in their own words. Responses were coded for accuracy, inaccuracy, or partial accuracy. Among the responses, 52% of respondents provided accurate responses, 18.9% of respondents provided inaccurate responses, and 26.5% of respondents provided partially correct responses. Common accurate responses addressed reputation management, controlling perceptions, protecting/maintaining image, crisis communication/prevention, and other similar concepts. Common inaccurate responses understood public relations practitioners to be informants, news-providers, or customer service/brand representatives, overall failing to acknowledge practitioners' loyalty to their respective client or clients and the power imbalances present in the communicative process between corporations and publics.

A few examples of accurate responses are as follows:

- “[The goal of public relations is] to guide the public-facing message of a company. Often to highlight positives and explain, downplay or ‘spin’ negatives.”
- “[The goal of public relations is to] influence public perception of a product/person/company.”
- “[Public relations pertains to image and [the] promotion of desired messages.”

These responses adequately address the intentions of public relations and the importance of promotion and influence within the industry.

In contrast, some examples of inaccurate responses include:

- “[Public relations] should inform the public with knowledge and possible solutions or outcomes so they can make wise decisions as needed.”
- “[Public relations is about] [k]eeping [the] public engaged, connected, informed, and concerned about their community and beyond, for health and safety, to provide equal opportunity to information, and foster connections that benefit society in general. Hard to put that in a few words.”
- “[Public relations is about] [c]onnecting with people concerning topics that hold similar interests.”
- “Public relations is the person or persons to talk about a business whether it is good or bad.”

These responses display a lack of understanding about the purpose of public relations. Many of the respondents believe PR practitioners to be loyal to the public rather than to their clients.

Ultimately, these responses exemplify a confusion about the true intentions of the public relations industry. Finally, an example of a partially correct response is as follows:

- “[The goal of public relations is] to build a connection with people outside of your organization that ultimately creates a relationship beneficial to either or both sides. It creates the public persona of an entity.”

In the case of this response, the respondent accurately assessed public relations as a method of relationship-building and that public relations crafts the “persona” of a brand. However, the respondent’s assertion that public relations creates mutually beneficial relationships on either or both sides (meaning on the side of the organization/corporation and the side of the public)

ultimately fails to account for the power imbalance within the communicative process between practitioners and publics. This response was therefore deemed partially correct.

Another survey question targeting RQ1 asked respondents to select the definition of a public relations pitch. Notably, only 24.3% of respondents recognized a pitch as a means of journalist relations—many respondents (38.4%) believed a PR pitch to be the introduction of a new idea to a client, and 28.1% of respondents selected the response referring to a pitch as the subtle introduction of positive ideas about a client through social media.

The next survey question addressed the concept of earned, owned, and paid media. Most respondents (28.1%) believed that public relations corresponded with paid media and 14.1% of respondents equated public relations to owned media. 22.2% of respondents accurately identified public relations as synonymous with earned media.

The final survey question pertaining to RQ1 tested participants' knowledge of the different functions of public relations. Specifically, respondents were asked to select all applicable functions from a list of 10 functions common to persuasive industries. The possible functions included: social media management, creation of television commercials, journalist relations, billboard placements, creation of print advertisements, crisis communication, product pricing strategies, event planning, reputation management, and product promotion. Predetermined correct responses and functions of public relations included social media management, journalist relations, crisis communication, event planning, and reputation management. The results of participants' responses are included in Table 1. Most respondents selected the correct responses as functions of public relations: 85.4% of respondents selected social media management, 84.3% of respondents selected journalist relations, 85.4% selected crisis communication, and 88.6% identified reputation management as a function of public

relations. However, fewer participants (49.7%) identified event planning as a function of public relations.

Table 1

Respondents identify functions of PR

Incorrect Functions

Function	Creation of television commercials	Billboard placements	Creation of print advertisements	Product pricing strategies	Product promotion
Frequency	80	83	82	28	83
Percent	43.2%	44.9%	44.3%	15.1%	44.9%

Correct Functions

Function	Social media management	Journalist relations	Crisis communication	Event planning	Reputation management
Frequency	158	156	158	92	164
Percent	85.4%	84.3%	85.4%	49.7%	88.6%

Despite most participants selecting the predetermined correct responses as functions of public relations, the discrepancy between earned and paid media from the previous survey question was exemplified in question four, as many participants also selected predetermined false responses as functions of public relations. For instance, 43.2% of respondents believed the creation of television commercials to be a function of public relations, and 44.9% and 44.3% of respondents believed that billboard placements and the creation of print advertisements were functions of public relations, respectively. 44.9% of participants also selected product promotion as a function of public relations, demonstrating a lack of discernment between the persuasive industries among participants.

RQ2: Are audiences able to distinguish between advertising and public relations tactics?

Four survey questions targeted RQ2 as well as considerations of advertising and public relations literacy. Participants were evaluated based on Holladay and Coombs' (2013) tactical dimension and strategic dimensions, or how much they could identify and evaluate given

information and their critical thinking within the context of advocacy. One survey question tested respondents' advertising literacy by utilizing

an advertisement from the American multinational corporation Coca-Cola.

The advertisement is displayed in Figure

1. Participants were told the advertisement was a paid communication

message they could see while flipping

through a magazine or scrolling on

Instagram. Participants were then asked

to identify the communication message as either 1) an advertisement 2) native advertising or 3) a

public relations ploy. There was also a fourth option of

"I do not know" which was available for selection.

91.4% of participants correctly identified the

communication message as advertising.

Participants were then asked to analyze a second communication message—a post featured on the official Coca-Cola Instagram account acknowledging the company's stance against Asian Hate. The survey question asked participants whether the unpaid post was 1) a social media advertisement 2) native advertising or 3) a public relations tactic. Participants were also able to select a fourth option of "I do not know."

Figure 1

Coca-Cola Advertisement



Figure 2

Coca-Cola PR Tactic

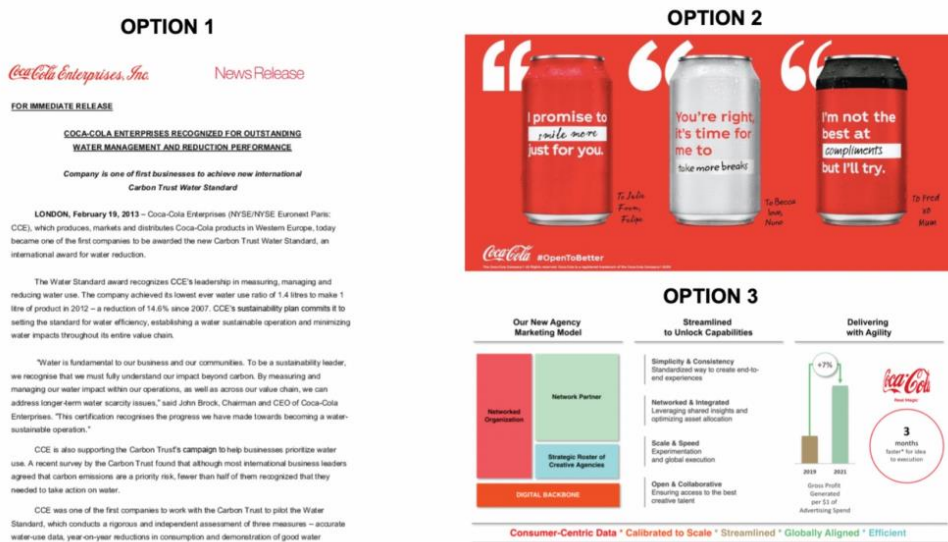


85.8% of respondents accurately identified the post as a public relations tactic.

Two other survey questions asked participants to analyze three media messages from Coca-Cola presented side-by-side. The first media message was a press release, the second was an advertisement, and the third was a marketing plan. The three media messages are displayed in Figure 3. The first survey question asked participants to select the media message which could be best described as a function of advertising. 92.4% of participants correctly identified the advertisement as a function of advertising. 92.4% of participants correctly identified the advertisement as a function of advertising. The following survey question asked participants to select the media message which could be best described as a function of public relations. 63.2% of respondents were able to recognize the press release as a function of public relations, while 10.3% of respondents attributed the advertisement as a function of public relations and 7.6% of respondents selected the marketing plan. 10.3% of respondents selected the “I do not know” option.

Figure 3

Three Media Messages



RQ3: Are audiences aware of public relations' influence on society?

There were four survey questions which corresponded with RQ3 and “potential effects on individuals and society,” an important feature of public relations literacy (Holladay & Coombs, 2013, p.128). The first question asked individuals to select the degree of their agreement/disagreement with the following statement: “Public Relations impacts individuals and society.” Many respondents (41.6%) agreed with the statement, while fewer respondents (28.6%) strongly agreed with the statement. The same statement pertaining to advertising (“advertising impacts individuals and society”) was presented to participants and participants were prompted to select their level of agreement/disagreement with the statement. 34.1% of respondents agreed with the statement and 42.2% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement.

Participants were then asked to provide reasoning for their degree of agreement with each statement. Common themes associated with advertising and its impact on individuals and society included the industry’s pervasiveness in society as well as its control over individual consumer decision-making/thinking processes. For instance, many respondents pointed to the idea that advertising establishes perceived wants and needs and contributes to a culture of constant consumerism. Respondents also mentioned the advertising industry’s impact on social norms and its construction/propagation of trends. A few respondents addressed concerns such as representation and psychological impact, as well as advertising’s effect on children. Exemplary responses are as follows:

- “When we see ourselves represented in an ad, we believe people ‘like us’ engage [with] or use that brand. It’s harder to see when representation is missing or portrays a group stereotypically.”

- “Advertising is ever present in our daily lives, creating impressions that make the world go round.”
- “Advertising is so present in everyday life everywhere you look, even if you don’t know you are being targeted, you almost always are.”

When asked to provide reasoning for their degree of agreement with the idea that public relations impacts society and individuals, most participants associated public relations’ effect on individuals and society with the industry’s capacity to influence perceptions and the industry’s ability to craft strategic messages. There were many respondents who viewed public relations as a form of open deception or manipulation, arguing that practitioners often conceal the truth from the public eye (particularly in instances of crisis communication). There were also several responses which mentioned advertising or product consumption in the context of public relations, demonstrating a misunderstanding about the functions of public relations. A few representative responses are as follows:

- “[Public relations] is very calculated work that is supposed to seem natural to the consumer, in which the consumer typically can’t tell that this is an effort.”
- “PR frames situations and facts. Say it enough and loudly and it changes the conversation.”
- “I think companies have been forced by society to take sides. Public relations work to get a company to appear palatable to their core audience.”
- “Effective public relations can craft or spin the narrative to tell the story that the company wants the public to know about and suppress the narratives it wants to conceal.”

RQ4: Are audiences able to critically analyze PR messages?

The final research question pertained to audiences' critical thinking and ability to deconstruct media messages, as was cited as an important feature of public relations literacy by Holladay and Coombs. There were five survey questions which largely tackled this feature of public relations literacy. These questions included a follow-up question to the aforementioned question prompting respondents to specify the corresponding industry of a media message (refer to Figure 1). The follow-up question asked respondents to discuss what they believed to be the goal of the media message (the media message which 91.4% of respondents correctly identified as a function of advertising). Among the responses, 77.5% of respondents were able to critically evaluate the advertisement. Responses that included mentions of selling, purchasing, or buying were coded as representing adequate levels of critical thinking. Responses that did not mention the idea of purchasing or selling and that took the advertisement at face-value were deemed as signifying inadequate levels of critical thinking (and as potentially representative of low advertising literacy).

There were also two follow-up questions to the aforementioned question asking individuals to identify the industry of origin of a second media message (refer to Figure 2). The first follow-up question asked respondents to explain how they selected their answer. Common responses among respondents who correctly identified the media message as a public relations tactic included ideas such as that the media message communicated a social position and was bolstering brand identity and awareness. Another portion of respondents were able to distinguish the message as a public relations tactic because they knew it was not a form of advertising and did not include product placement. The respondents who incorrectly identified the public relations tactic as either advertising or who selected the "I do not know" option commonly

reported that they were led to their answer based on the fact that the post was on Instagram and that a brand logo was displayed in the post.

The second follow-up question asked respondents to explain potential benefits of Coca-Cola's involvement in a conversation about Asian Hate. Responses that mentioned appeals to audiences and company identity/reputation were coded as displaying sufficient critical thinking. Responses that mentioned Coca-Cola taking a social stance or increasing awareness about the issue without delving into company-specific benefits were coded as displaying insufficient critical thinking. Among the responses, 62% of respondents displayed adequate critical thinking skills in the context of public relations, while 33.8% displayed inadequate critical thinking skills.

Another survey question measuring critical thinking followed the aforementioned questions asking respondents to identify the advertisement among three different media messages (refer to Figure 3). The follow-up question asked participants to explain how they reached the conclusion that the media message was a form of advertising. Common themes among the 92.4% of responses that correctly identified the advertisement included ideas such as that the media message was highly visual and digestible, that it included product placement, and that it was appealing to the consumer. Although there were not many incorrect answers, among those who misidentified the advertisement and who responded to the follow-up question, a common notion was that all three of the media messages were forms of advertising.

There was also a follow-up question to the question asking respondents to identify which of the three media messages was a form of public relations. This question asked respondents to explain what led them to their answer. Among the 62.3% of responses which accurately identified the press release as a form of public relations, there was a portion of respondents who articulated that the media message was a press release and/or a form of journalist relations. Other

respondents were able to identify the media message as a function of public relations because the media message was long and informative, that it seemed like some sort of letter or announcement, and less frequently, that it seemed to deal with company identity and reputation. There was not an apparent common theme among incorrect answers, although many of the respondents noted that they were unable to read the press release and were therefore unable to make an accurate assessment.

Discussion

Participants of the survey were predominantly white, female, and college educated. While this presents a large demographic bias within the study, this trend also justifies the results as women are leaders within the consumerism industry. In fact, “women drive 70-80% of all consumer purchasing decisions,” implicating that advertising and public relations strategies and tactics could be very successful when geared towards women (Davis, 2019). According to data collected by Nielson Scarborough, “85% of women say that when they like a brand, they will stick with it,” and women are highly conscious of brands that align with their personal values (“The Power of She”). Public relations literacy is therefore highly relevant in the context of women in that it can allow them to challenge their beliefs and perceptions about brands/corporations in order to become more empowered, informed citizens. It is paramount to focus increasing efforts on media literacy towards women. especially considering that the results of the current study indicated a lack of public relations literacy among the sample.

The survey questions relating to RQ1 and the general practice of public relations demonstrated meaningful results. Only a little over half (52%) of respondents were able to describe the functions of public relations with full accuracy. While more participants than expected were able to adequately explain the functions of public relations (which can perhaps be

attributed to the predominantly college-educated sample size), the partially incorrect and fully incorrect responses which understood practitioners to be informants or news-providers are cause for concern, primarily in the context of empowering citizens. If citizens are unable to recognize that practitioners are loyal to the corporations they serve and that they have virtually no allegiance to the public, then said citizens will be uncritical in the face of PR messages, and, by extension, will compose a population of uncritical consumers and citizens. Demonstrating awareness of the primary functions of public relations is one of the first criteria for being considered public relations literate, as articulated by Holladay and Coombs (2013). Therefore, it is significant that respondents were unable to achieve even the first target of the public relations literacy criteria.

It is also notable that most respondents were unable to recognize a public relations pitch as a means of journalist relations. Public relations' impact on American journalism is one of its defining characteristics, yet respondents demonstrated a lack of awareness of the relationship between practitioners and journalists. In fact, only 6.5% of respondents explicitly mentioned media relations or the idea of media at all in their free responses regarding the function of public relations. There were no responses that mentioned the terms "journalism" or "journalists." These results indicate a lack of awareness surrounding public relations' often direct influence on what appears in the media and news.

A large portion of respondents were also unable to identify public relations as corresponding with earned media. The fact that 28.1% of participants selected paid media as corresponding with public relations is not an immediate cause for concern: these terms are more technical, and participants who do not hold specialized knowledge may have been unable to understand the context of the question. However, despite the technical nature of these terms, it is

expected that public relations literate participants could have eliminated paid media as a viable choice if they had understood the primary functions of public relations. It is important that audiences understand that public relations is unpaid because its messaging is often covert and can potentially require more critical thinking and resistance than paid messaging like advertising.

The results of the question asking participants to select the functions of public relations out of 10 possible options had potentially negative implications for the public relations literacy of the sample. Many respondents selected the five correct functions of public relations (most respondents recognized social media management, journalist relations and crisis communication as functions of public relations, while almost half of participants selected event planning). However, a significant portion of the respondents also selected the false responses (e.g., 44.9% of respondents, almost half of the sample, believed the creation of billboard placements to be a function of public relations). The results of this question could indicate that participants were taking educated guesses with their responses, as most of the options contained two-fifths or more of the sample vote (the only option which contained less than two-fifths of the vote was product pricing strategies). Overall, the results indicated a lack of differentiation between the functions of public relations and the functions of other persuasive industries. This indication points to a lack of specific knowledge about public relations and potentially low public relations literacy among the sample.

The survey questions addressing RQ2 yielded results indicating that participants struggled to differentiate between advertising and public relations tactics. While more participants than expected (85.8%) were able to identify Figure 4 as a public relations tactic (once again, this could be attributed to the widely college-educated sample), there was a higher percentage of participants (91.4%) who were able to recognize Figure 3 as a form of advertising.

These results highlight a narrow yet meaningful disparity between participants' advertising literacy versus their public relations literacy. There was an even greater disparity when participants were asked to differentiate between three different media messages (see "Appendix A"). 92.4% of participants correctly identified the advertisement, while only 63.2% of the sample identified the press release as a function of public relations. While many participants noted in the follow-up question that they could not read the press release and therefore could not determine its corresponding persuasive industry, it can be inferred that with proper public relations literacy, participants would have recognized the "News Release" title and understood the media message to be a form of public relations. Overall, the results of this section indicate that audiences are more skilled at recognizing advertising than they are at recognizing public relations tactics, which can be attributed to a more prominent focus on advertising literacy in American society and the lack of emphasis placed on public relations literacy.

Regarding RQ3, most respondents agreed with the idea that both advertising and public relations impacts individuals and society. However, a paired sample T-test demonstrated a significant statistical difference ($<.001$) between the means of participants who agreed with the advertising statement versus those who agreed with the public relations statement: overall, participants found advertising to be more impactful on individuals and society than they did public relations. This finding is revealing of society's lack of emphasis on public relations education considering that public relations can be arguably more impactful on individuals and society in that the industry can be far more effective than the advertising industry (Wynne, 2014). Despite respondents' belief that advertising is more impactful than public relations, participants were equally critical of both industries. A few particularly insightful responses are as follows:

- “When we see ourselves represented in an ad[vertisement], we believe people ‘like us’ engage or use that brand. It’s harder to see when representation is missing or portrays a group stereotypically.”
- “The goal of [public relations] is to sway or repair public opinion. It can often swing perceptions particularly among under informed individuals who are more susceptible to sensational tactics.”
- “We are bombarded with so much advertising, it would be impossible to avoid being influenced by it.”
- “I think companies have been forced by society to take sides. Public relations works to get a company to appear palatable to their core audience.”

A few responses were even more critical of the persuasive industries and equated advertising and public relations to propaganda:

- “I feel like propaganda and political movements really affect how we think about things, and I would say even one negative thing coming out about a company or individual really damages how they’re seen by society. Therefore both the positive and negative images [and public relations] affect[s] society greatly.”
- “Propaganda is a type of advertising and it’s highly highly effective. We see ads everyday. They pay the bills for many content creators as well. The presence and influence of ads is only increasing.”

These responses indicate the critical perspectives taken by individuals regarding the persuasive industry. Perhaps American citizens have learned to adopt this critical perspective as a result of living in a highly consumer-driven atmosphere with media as its driving vehicle. In

fact, one response articulated this phenomenon when explaining their degree of agreement with the statement about the importance of public relations:

- “I would have said "strongly agree," but in an era where everybody seems to be hyper-aware of the media and its messages, I think the PR industry may currently be facing a lot of skepticism.”

Overall, the results from these survey questions indicate that participants are highly skeptical of the persuasive industries. This level of skepticism is certainly beneficial and even necessary in terms of critical thinking, yet despite the profound nature of these responses, the results of RQ4 indicated less than satisfactory critical thinking and analysis of public relations messages among the sample. Critical perspectives do not equate to critical thinking skills, and public relations literacy must be emphasized to address this disparity.

The follow-up questions to the advertisement in Figure 2 and the public relations tactic in Figure 3 ultimately revealed a disparity in the sample’s ability to critically evaluate advertising messages versus public relations messages. While 77.5% of participants were successfully able to critically evaluate advertising, only 52% were able to successfully analyze the public relations message represented in Figure 3. This disparity encapsulates the idea that because advertising literacy is a more primary focus in society than public relations literacy (or perhaps that advertisements are by nature simpler to analyze and/or that adults tend to demonstrate sufficient advertising literacy according to John, 1999), audiences are able to better understand advertisements than they are public relations tactics.

Examples of responses corresponding to the public relations tactic represented in Figure 3 that were coded as displaying insufficient critical thinking and therefore insufficient public relations literacy are as follows:

- “[The message] shows the company’s willingness to acknowledge racism and condemn it, standing up for its employees and customers.”
- “[The message] promotes awareness about racism and discrimination against Asians.”
- “[Coke is] using their powerful voice to support the common good.”

These responses, while representing altruistic visions of the Coca-Cola brand, neglect to consider the more business-oriented motivations for why Coca-Cola would be speaking out against Asian Hate. Ultimately, these responses display a lack of public relations literacy as they seem to neglect to consider the practitioners who carefully craft the humanized messages they receive from brands. There are many negative implications surrounding the inability to critically analyze public relations messages, including the idea that audiences cannot employ media resistance strategies without recognizing public relations messages and the ability to critically deconstruct them.

The responses to the question prompting respondents to elaborate on how they selected the advertisement out of three different media messages (refer to Figure 5) demonstrated sufficient critical thinking from the sample in terms of advertising in that many of the responses mentioned product placement or appeal to the consumer. When asked to elaborate on the public relations message, there was a group of respondents who were not aware that the message was a press release but who were still able to correctly identify the message as a form of public relations. Most of these respondents were able to identify the use of public relations on the basis

that the press release appeared like a letter or an announcement. This assessment displayed a basic level of critical analysis in that the participants realized that public relations often corresponds with complex written messaging. While fewer respondents who were not immediately aware that the message was a press release went a step further and acknowledged that the letter seemed to be about bolstering/maintaining brand identity and awareness, this lack of advanced critical thinking could be attributed to participants' inability to read the release. Overall, respondents displayed a lack of understanding surrounding a primary function of public relations (a press release/journalist relations), although critical thinking skills are more difficult to define in this scenario.

Limitations

This study was limited by various factors. For one, the snowball sampling method could not achieve a sufficient breadth of coverage across all the demographics within the United States. In fact, the study was highly skewed towards white, college educated women. While it would have been beneficial to have more balanced coverage, the limited population supports the assertion that public relations literacy is lacking in the United States. Considering that women are leaders in the consumer industry, it can be assumed that women engage more with corporate persuasive media messages. Women, especially college educated women, may therefore demonstrate higher levels of public relations literacy than the average United States population. Because the study highlighted gaps in the sample's public relations literacy, it can be inferred that the population displays equally if not more severe gaps in their public relations literacy. It is also worth mentioning that the sample size of 185, while potentially statistically significant, was limited by time and resources and does not encapsulate the entire United States population.

The survey and results were also impeded by various limitations. While based on Holladay and Coombs' proposed public relations literacy definition, the survey itself could not fully encompass the criteria and expanded to include corporate public relations. In terms of the results, there were many interesting and meaningful findings, such as that most respondents were unable to accurately identify the definition of a public relations pitch. In hindsight, it would have been valuable to include more questions that specifically tested the sample's knowledge of public relations and its relationship with American journalism. Many participants also mentioned that they could not read the press release (see Figure 5) despite a disclaimer informing participants that it was unnecessary to read each word of the messages and advising them to instead go off their initial impressions of the messages. Due to difficulties with comprehension, it is possible that the 63.2% of participants who were able to identify the press release as a function of public relations is a skewed result. However, it is unlikely that the statistic would vary much even if participants were able to clearly read the release considering that those with knowledge of press releases would be able to identify the media message by its header alone.

Implications and Conclusion

The results of this study suggest a lack of public relations literacy among U.S. adults. In comparison with their levels of advertising literacy, the sampled adults displayed lower levels of public relations literacy. The sampled adults also found the advertising industry to be more impactful on individuals and society than the public relations industry. While these results are preliminary, they suggest an educational gap in the United States. Unlike advertising, which is often easier to identify, this study exemplifies how public relations messages are often more difficult to recognize and analyze. However, the discourse surrounding media literacy widely addresses advertising literacy rather than public relations literacy.

As citizens lack knowledge of the public relations industry, they remain vulnerable to corporate agendas. Citizens with low public relations literacy cannot properly engage in the public sphere, which is a threat to the individuals' free will and ultimately to American democracy. The results of this study indicate a need for more research in the field of public relations literacy—public relations education must be centered within academia to protect and empower American citizens.

Appendix

Media Literacy Assessment

Welcome! This survey will test your knowledge of different types of media. Please select the arrow below to proceed to the consent form. Your participation is appreciated!

Q1 In your own words, please describe the primary functions of public relations as you understand it.

Q2 Please select the definition that best describes the function of a "PR pitch."

- In which a PR practitioner "pitches" or introduces a new idea to a client
- In which a PR practitioner "pitches" or subtly introduces positive ideas about their client to the public (i.e., through social media)
- In which a PR practitioner "pitches" or sends a message to a journalist in hopes that the journalist will publish a story about their client
- I do not know

Q3 Public relations corresponds to which form of media?

- Earned Media
- Owned Media
- Paid Media
- I do not know

Q4 Which of the following are a function of public relations? Please select all that apply.

- Social Media Management
- Creation of Television Commercials
- Journalist Relations
- Billboard Placements

- Creation of Print Advertisements
- Crisis Communication
- Product Pricing Strategies
- Event Planning
- Reputation Management
- Product Promotion

The following questions will ask you to analyze a media message. Please refer to the image below when selecting your responses.



Q5 Imagine you are flipping through a magazine or scrolling on Instagram and see this communication message. Based on context, you understand that this message is a paid placement. This media message is most likely...

- An advertisement
- Native advertising
- A public relations ploy
- I do not know

Q6 What is most likely the goal of this media message?

Q7 You will now be asked to analyze a second media message. Please refer to the image below when selecting your responses.



Q8 This message was posted on the official Coca Cola Instagram. Considering that this was not a paid placement, this message is most likely...

- A social media advertisement
- Native advertising
- A public relations tactic
- I do not know

Q9 How do you know? What led you to your answer?

Q10 Considering that social issues can be controversial topics, what are the benefits of Coca Cola's involvement in a conversation about Asian hate?

You will now be asked to analyze three different forms of media. Please refer to the images below when selecting your responses. Also please note that it is not necessary to read every word of each message—please go off your initial impression when selecting your response.

OPTION 1

Coca-Cola Enterprises, Inc. News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

COCA-COLA ENTERPRISES RECOGNIZED FOR OUTSTANDING WATER MANAGEMENT AND REDUCTION PERFORMANCE

Company is one of first businesses to achieve new international Carbon Trust Water Standard

LONDON, February 19, 2013 – Coca-Cola Enterprises (NYSE/NYSE Euronext Paris: CCE), which produces, markets and distributes Coca-Cola products in Western Europe, today became one of the first companies to be awarded the new Carbon Trust Water Standard, an international award for water reduction.

The Water Standard award recognizes CCE's leadership in measuring, managing and reducing water use. The company achieved its lowest ever water use ratio of 1.4 litres to make 1 litre of product in 2012 – a reduction of 14.6% since 2007. CCE's sustainability plan commits it to setting the standard for water efficiency, establishing a water sustainable operation and minimizing water impacts throughout its entire value chain.

"Water is fundamental to our business and our communities. To be a sustainability leader, we recognise that we must fully understand our impact beyond carbon. By measuring and managing our water impact within our operations, as well as across our value chain, we can address longer-term water scarcity issues," said John Brock, Chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola Enterprises. "This certification recognises the progress we have made towards becoming a water-sustainable operation."

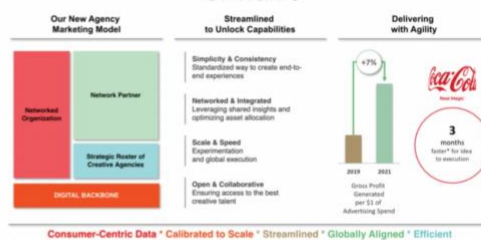
CCE is also supporting the Carbon Trust's campaign to help businesses prioritize water use. A recent survey by the Carbon Trust found that although most international business leaders agreed that carbon emissions are a priority risk, fewer than half of them recognized that they needed to take action on water.

CCE was one of the first companies to work with the Carbon Trust to pilot the Water Standard, which conducts a rigorous and independent assessment of three measures – accurate water-use data, year-on-year reductions in consumption and demonstration of good water management.

OPTION 2



OPTION 3



Q11 Out of these three media messages, which can be best described as a function of advertising?

- Option 1
- Option 2
- Option 3
- I do not know

Q12 Please provide reasoning for your answer above. How did you know this message was a form of advertising? (Or please write N/A if you chose "I do not know").

Q13 Out of these three communication messages, which can be best described as a function of public relations?

- Option 1
- Option 2
- Option 3
- I do not know

Q14 Please provide reasoning for your answer above. How did you know this message was a form of public relations? (Or please write N/A if you chose "I do not know").

Q15 You will now be presented with different statements. Please select the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement. Please provide reasoning for your answer when prompted.

Q16 Public relations impacts society and individuals.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q17 Please provide reasoning for your response above.

Q18 Advertising impacts society and individuals.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Q19 Please provide reasoning for your response above.

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