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DISSERTATION TITLE: Do modern day PR practitioners share the views with Edward Bernays that ‘command of social sciences is requisite to success’?

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Within various definitions of Public Relations, a lot of emphasis is placed on the word ‘reputation’ rather than the expression ‘influencing opinion and behaviour’.

Other arguments include the importance of media relations with PR. Bland Theaker and Wragg wrote in *Effective Media Relations*: ‘For many public relations practitioners much of their time is taken up with media relations (2005, pg1)

When looking at the history of Public Relations, theorists such as Aristotle and Freud focused on these motives and exploring the science of persuasion; this study will see if it is still considered today by PR practitioners.

Bernays claimed that ‘if users of PR services were aware of the importance of these sciences, they would know that command of social sciences is requisite to success. But employers of PR advisers are possibly just as ignorant of the needs of the field as many practitioners are themselves’

Therefore my research aim is ‘Do modern day PR practitioners share the views with Edward Bernays that *‘command of social sciences is requisite to success’?*

There are many different motivations for undertaking this research. Firstly, there is a gap in literature from a PR perspective. I want to update and add to previous studies to enable people to understand that PR does use elements of social science when carrying out tactics.

Secondly, in my experience, I believe that there is a huge emphasis on media relations within the industry. Results are regularly based on press coverage rather than business performance.

This study attempts to explain to practitioners that psychology of persuasion is too greatly important and that it should be used as a base for all tactics. Using psychology of persuasion, practitioners can influence behaviour to increase reputation and also custom, stressing business performance in addition to press coverage.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 History of Psychology of Persuasion

The theorists Aristotle and Edward Bernays were enthusiasts in the subject of psychology in persuasion.

Aristotle taught persuasion ideas in Ancient Greece. He taught ‘rhetoric’ which he called ‘the art of persuasion’. He defined five principles of persuasion of ‘Invention’, ‘Arrangement’, ‘Style’, ‘Memory’ and ‘Delivery’.

Aristotle created the ‘artistic persuasion’ which was made up of three elements of Ethos, Logos and Pathos, which must be used in unison to succeed. (Source: Aristotle, cited by Thompson, 1999, pg1-9)

Bernays tried to raise awareness in the use of psychological tactics within PR. He gave his first course in 1923 named 'A course on Theory and Practical Method'. Reflecting on this Bernays wrote in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (1955 cited in 2005) 'The increasing attention given by universities, publicists, and writers to the importance of sound public relations...made business aware of the need for modifying its attitudes, and actions to conform to public demands as well as for getting the public to understand its position'.

Bernays beliefs build on my argument as it confirms my personal experiences and views that awareness should be raised towards the psychology of PR. It is not clear how many practitioners are aware of using these techniques in activities; therefore I collated data in my primary research in order to update the context of this subject.

The terms 'PR practitioners' and 'social sciences' were extracted from my dissertation question to use as a basis to my research.

2.2 Social Psychology

Social psychology is the scientific study of the effects of social and cognitive processes on the way individuals perceive, influence, and relate to others' (Smith & Mackie, 2000, pg3)

Smith & Mackie (2000, pg73) list four ways in which attitudes can form when no existing attitude is held, these were 'mere exposure', 'associative learning', 'self perception' and 'functional reasons'.

Social Psychology texts focus on attitudes when exploring psychology of persuasion. 'Mere exposure effect (Zajonc, 1968, quoted by Smith & Mackie, 2000, pg73) is the tendency to develop more positive feelings towards objects and individuals the more we are exposed to them.' The amount of awareness of a brand or company is the desired outcome from PR activity and so the focus on repetition and exposure links to psychology once a campaign has been completed. This is a subject I explored in primary research as it poses a question of when psychology of PR can be used – before, during or after a campaign has been implemented.

2.3 Role of the PR Practitioner

A PR practitioners activities and actions can determine if public relations uses psychological tools for success.

Fawkes (cited by Theaker, 2004) outlays the different activities carried out by PR practitioners. All of the activities listed by Fawkes use the words 'communicate' or 'monitor', giving no consideration for the understanding of publics which is crucial for communication. PR practitioners must understand their publics to create a strategy for any campaign; therefore psychology is at the basis of all communications.

PR Week US interviewed Kate Messenger, MD of Ogilvy PR (see appendix 1). When asked 'What would you do if you didn't do what you do', she replied 'Psychology - though you could argue that this is what we do in PR: working to understand our audience and make our message compelling'. This personal viewpoint builds on my research question, stating that my hypothesis is true within her personal day-to-day activities.

Public Relations Quarterly published an article named 'Ivy Lee: Minimising Competition through Public Relations' (Olasky, 1987). The author believes that 'companies needed a strategist...with a sophisticated understanding of...popular psychology...That someone was Ivy Lee' (Olasky, 1987) and that this makes 'good public relations'. This belief has been tested within my primary research to define if PR practitioners agree that their daily activities and campaigns have to comprise of a psychological basis.

2.4 Persuasion

Persuasion is a 'symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their attitudes or behaviour regarding an issue through the transmission of a message, in an atmosphere of free choice' (Perloff, 2003, pg8) This allowed me to explore to if modern day PR practitioners believe that their roles consciously use psychology tactics within their day-to-day activities.

Perloff also identified five components of the definition; as a symbolic process, involving an attempt to influence, people persuading themselves, involving the transmission of a message and requiring free choice.

As important as the communication of the message is, I believe that psychology of publics need to be understood in order to make it effective.

2.5 Elaboration Likelihood Model

When exploring the psychology of persuasion within PR and Social Psychology texts, the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) is commonly used. This model 'argues that there are two ways that a persuasive message can cause attitude change, each differing in the amount of cognitive effort or elaboration they require'. There are two possible routes for this theory – Central and Peripheral. The peripheral relies greatly on the effectiveness of the message source, the communicator must be able to persuade through their behaviour and so the publics must be understood greatly.

The reasoning behind and the interpretation of this model is very similar within both fields despite coming from different approaches. This does show that PR and social psychology are very relevant to each other and that they can be used in unison to aim for more successful results.

2.6 Professional and Academic Journals

Articles and Journals are hugely insightful to the implementation of psychological tactics within PR and highlight the importance of it. An example of which is The Journal of Public Relations published a study by Ronald D Smith (1993) which applies Psychological Type Theory (Myers-Briggs) to PR. The author believes that this method, used to improve communications, can give insights into relationships. The author supports Bernays beliefs that the '*command of social sciences is requisite to success*' (1955, cited within Public Relations Quarterly, 2005) when he declares that 'if they fail to consider psychological type, PR writers may be at a distinct disadvantage.' Smith's study has proven that psychological tools used in PR can be implemented within a campaign and create successful results. I have built on this theory by exploring how aware PR practitioners are of the usage of these tools.

2.7 Conclusion

This review shows that further research is needed into the psychology of PR as a lot of literature available is slightly outdated. I aimed to update this knowledge to today in all sectors, providing an insight into the psychological tools that can be used within PR activity. Although some explanations are offered within this review, the awareness of psychology in PR within modern day practitioners is not clear and so this was fully researched within my primary research.

3.0 Methodology

Multiple methods have been used within this study to ensure that there are no gaps in research as both methods examine different areas. This guarantees that all research questions were thoroughly investigated.

3.1 Initial Research

Initial secondary research was carried out to gain understanding of the topics involved and to learn which methods I would need to employ to fully research my question.

I investigated the topic through textbooks, journals, reports, newspaper articles and websites.

To gather information for this paper, I carried out both primary and secondary research. By exploring existing literature and press coverage in social psychology and persuasion, techniques and views employed by PR practitioners have been identified. This allowed me to identify key citations which I investigated further within primary research.

3.2 Philosophy

As my research question relies heavily on personal viewpoints, I used the phenomenology philosophy when approaching this study. Factors of values, ethics, experience and beliefs were considered when carrying out research and also when analysing my primary data.

3.2.1. Ontological and Epistemological Philosophy for Research Design

Ontology and epistemology were considered as they give implications for the methodology needed for the study. In order to reach methodological choices to gain the best results for my study, I examined my position to decide on methodology to gain valid conclusions.

Relativism is the ontology for this study. Relativism is based on opinion and viewpoints. Truth requires agreement across all viewpoints and facts depend on viewpoint of observer.

3.2.2 Independent Researcher

Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe (2002, pg43) believe that the 'researcher must maintain complete independence if there is to be validity in results produced'.

I ensured that my strong viewpoints did not affect my research methods. I approached this research with objectivity to ensure it did not influence any responses during interviews and surveys. If I failed to do this, my results would be invalid and it would not be able to stand up against examination.

3.2.3 Validity

To ensure that my research results were valid, the relativist standpoint for methodology examined the 'validity, reliability or generalisability'. (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 2002, pg53)

Once my research was carried out, 'validity, reliability or generalisability' needed to be examined. The results of such examination are placed within the findings section (see section 5.0) If I failed to do this, my results would be invalid and would not be able to defend itself against scrutiny.

3.3 Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods were crucial to my study as they examine attitudes and behaviours. They focus on detail and interpret meanings of human actions.

3.3.1 Interviews

In-depth interviews were crucial to this study, they allowed me to construct open question that required an opinionated response.

Interviews took the form of semi-structured focused interviews. These were based on a small number of open-ended questions which can be expanded on by the interviewer. They 'ensure equivalent coverage' (Gillham, 2005, pg70)

Interviews were with senior practitioners to gain an insight into their personal practices and also within their company practices. Senior practitioners have a greater experience and knowledge to provide valid and useful answers. The interviewees came from PR consultancy staff with experience in various sectors, public relations tutors with experience of in-house and consultancy plus freelance PR consultants with experience in both in-house and consultancy.

Interviewing practitioners from different sectors allowed my consensus to be valid and applicable for all sectors rather than being bias to a sector, which had different viewpoints and practices to others.

3.3.2 Focus Groups

Focus groups allowed me to bring together a group of people, all of which have different experiences within PR and discuss my topic of psychology of persuasion. They gave me a great insight into PR practice and peoples perceptions of the role of psychology within it.

Participants were Leeds Metropolitan University students who had recently completed a placement year within a PR team. This sample was useful as they all were deeply involved within PR activity and they also had observed their working environment as part of their learning. As they had been actively involved with a great number of colleagues, they were able to tell me their own personal viewpoint and actions, and then those of their colleagues. As my question was so reliant on personal viewpoints, this method enabled me to gain a large amount of information within a small space of time.

The research aim was kept in mind throughout the focus group to ensure the subject did not escape from discussion. I lead the focus group to ensure this did not happen.

3.3.3 Content Analysis

Content analysis examines attitudes, values and motivation which are extremely relevant to this study.

A 'latent' content analysis was carried out (Holsti, 1969, pg12); this is a method where meanings and messages can be interpreted from dialogue. Themes and attitudes were examined carefully in order to attempt to interpret underlying meanings from interviews and focus groups.

I analysed all interviews and focus groups to examine methods participants employ to persuade audiences. I focused on respondents reasoning behind their techniques of persuasion, their viewpoints on use of psychology within PR and also any psychological tactics that were not identified by respondents during the activity. This helped me identify psychological techniques PR practitioners may use unconsciously.

Content Analysis was my method for analysis of data. This allowed me to observe my data and identify concepts to create a hypothesis for the subject. I explored at my data which produced meanings, and also reviewed the information and its interpretations to identify key concepts and to ensure it is a true representation of current activity and that the theory would be the same if I had carried out the research again.

3.4 Quantitative Research

3.4.1 Survey

A survey was very useful to get a broader range of opinions from PR practitioners without having to talk to each participant. These were convenient for participants as they were available online and also the influence of my strong opinions would be eliminated.

The aim of the survey was to find out if PR practitioners see psychology of persuasion as the key role within their campaigns. It was distributed to practitioners in freelance, consultancy and in-house roles. Groups of interest including gender, age groups and seniority were of variety to give a wider scope to

the research and enabled me to find key themes in sectors, activities and attitudes, this also meant that the data held no bias too a certain viewpoint or practices. This gave me a broader range of opinions for the use of psychology within PR as a whole, in all roles and sectors. This variation in participants allowed a generalisation during analysis of the data.

The survey was targeted at roles ranging from Account Assistant to Account Executive as senior practitioners were targeted in interviews; this allowed me to gain a broader range of opinions and ensured that all job roles were fully explored.

3.6 Scope and Limitations

As psychology of persuasion has not been greatly explored in recent times, I looked into this in great detail, focusing on the day-to-day activities of and tactics used by current PR practitioners.

When considering my methodology, I considered the following limitations:

- Range of information available
- Concepts and theories were simple and concise in order for participants within research can understand what I am asking and so that my results are trustworthy.
- Limitations in a number of interviewees and sample size
- I ensured that my strong viewpoints did not affect my research methods.
- Time was restricted within this study
- As finance for this study is limited, research cannot be as fully explorative as this restriction is placed on it.

3.7 Ethics

Ethics are extremely important when carrying out all research. The British Sociological Association released the 'Statement of Ethical Practice' (The British Sociological Association, 2002) for social research. This statement includes 61 basic principles which may arise throughout studies. I ensured that those most relevant to my study were adhered by being objective throughout the project, ensuring all participants were briefed, consenting and remained anonymous plus providing a solid background for further specific research.

Leeds Metropolitan University's ethical code of conduct was also kept to.

5.0 Findings, Discussion and Analysis

5.1 The key role of a PR practitioner

A significant finding from the primary research was that PR practitioners believe their key role is media relations. 82% of all participants within qualitative and quantitative methods believe that this role is far more important than psychology of persuasion.

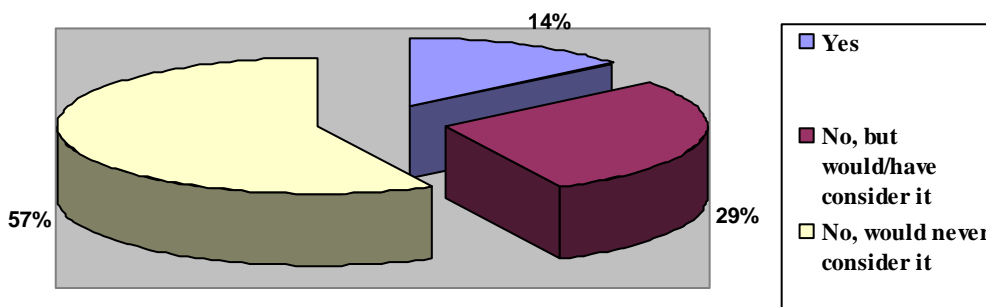
Reasons for this included the increasing pressure from clients who measure the success of a campaign on the quantity of media coverage achieved, due to this, good relationships with journalists lead to exposure and successful campaigns.

This figure very much agrees with Bland, Theaker and Wragg's statement that media relations is central to public relations activity. It also links to the 'Mere exposure effect' (Zajonc, 1968, quoted by Smith & Mackie, 2000, pg73). It also suggests that public relations practitioners do not consciously use psychology tactics within their day-to-day activities as they are likely to use psychology of persuasion within all communications to press.

5.2 Employment of psychologists within public relations

Within my primary research, it was required to seek the extent to which psychology is employed within current public relations practices and whether modern day practices agrees with Olasky and Bernays on the employment of such skill.

Figure 5.1 PR practitioners responses to the consideration of or employment of a psychologist within their organisation



This data shows that currently there is scope for use of psychologists within public relations organisations. Some believe that it is useful within agencies that have a wide range of audiences and can use it as a unique selling point. Others believe that audience behaviour can be discovered through experience, using their common sense only.

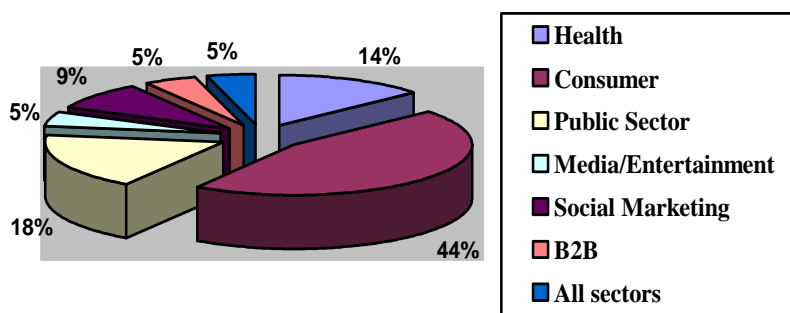
These findings indicate that PR practitioners believe that their desk research and knowledge and sufficient enough to aim their tactics at target audiences effectively. Only two respondents, both directors, had ever used or seriously considered employing a psychologist, this shows potential scope for use in the future. These findings illustrate that modern day practitioners do not agree with Olasky’s and Bernays views as much of the data shows that practitioners believe that there is no desire to employ a psychologist; their own skills are adequate enough to understand and engage with audiences.

5.3 Sectors likely to employ psychology of persuasion within campaigns

Bernays suggests that psychology is needed for success in all sectors. This study tested this theory in current practices to seek if psychology is only relevant to particular sectors.

Following interviews and focus groups, the findings suggest that psychology is relevant to only some areas (see figure 5.2)

Figure 5.2 PR practitioners responses to which PR sectors they believe are more likely to use psychology of persuasion within campaigns



This survey also supports this argument, with only 5% of participants believing that psychology is relevant to all sectors. This implicates that Bernays quote may be flawed. The use of psychology may be limited within PR, being only relevant to certain sectors such as health and consumer.

5.4 Psychology tactics used in current public relations practice

This study has revealed various psychology tactics that are currently used in practice consciously and unconsciously.

Psychology tactics identified by respondents during interviews and focus groups were:

- Technique of communication
- Repetition of key messages
- Treatment of press/hospitality
- Research
- New media
- Constant contact with press
- Free products
- Targeting media
- Case studies
- Personal interest activities for press
- Interesting venue for events
- Changing perceptions
- Understanding audiences
- Use of experts
- Celebrity endorsements

The survey results agreed with the tactics above, other tactics identified in the survey were:

- Personalisation/identification of representatives

Throughout the research, tactics were also identified that were unconsciously used and identified by the public relations practitioners. These were:

- Relationships
- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

The respondent from interview eight failed to recognise that relations with media and publics need the use of psychology to ensure they will be successful. The respondent from focus group two failed to recognise that using an organisations CSR activity as its focus for press stories; the public relations activity planned to use these stories in order to portray a certain image of the organisation.

This links back to Fawkes (2004) theory on activities carried out by PR practitioners (see figure 2.1). PR practitioners must understand their publics to create a strategy for any campaign therefore psychology is at the basis of all communications. During the research process, many of the participants recognised that psychology is the basis of all communications; this is shown in the tactics they identified.

The tactic identified as the 'approach to communication' referred the way in which practitioners communicate with press and audiences through language and other techniques within tools such as press releases. This links with the theory of Perloff (2003) (see section 2.4) which was discussed earlier. Through the findings, it seems that PR practitioners from the sample agree with this as a number of them identified the way in which they communicate as a psychology tactic they employ within activities.

The use of experts has been identified as a psychology of persuasion tactic currently in use by PR practitioners. This can be related to the history of psychology of persuasion and the theories of Aristotle. Aristotle created the 'artistic persuasion' (cited by Thompson, 1999, pg1-9), this very much links to the use of experts in current practice. This tactic also connects to the peripheral route within the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The links between current practices and theory demonstrates that practitioners are using the basis of this theory unconsciously within activities.

These findings are useful in proving that psychology is employed within current public relations practice, and from the tactics identified, it is clearly shown that psychology has a dominant role within activity. These findings also indicate that many modern day PR practitioners do not entirely consciously use psychology within their activities; many fail to recognise psychology tactics employed within campaigns.

5.5 Conscious use of psychology within public relations

Throughout interviews and focus groups, it became clear whether participants used psychology conscious/unconsciously within public relations activity. This finding was pertinent to this study as it will answer the key question and aim of this study - to resolve if modern day PR practitioners believe that their roles consciously use psychology tactics within their day-to-day activities.

50% of respondents admitted that they use psychology unconsciously within campaigns, many of which believed it is a subtle element of public relations activity.

Others stated (45%) that they consciously used psychology tactics within campaigns, carefully considering them within planning stages. This agrees with Ajzen's 'planned behaviour' (1989, quoted by Smith & Mackie, 2000, pg87). Social psychologists believe that planning is crucial to predicting and influencing behaviour. It also agrees to my own viewpoint that tactics need planning for methods of communication in order to fit their target audience and therefore the psychology of their audience needs to be considered.

5 % did not realise before or after the research process that they had employed psychology tactics at all.

The majority of those who admitted using psychology tactics unconsciously during activity were those participants within the focus groups who were all students who had completed a year-in-industry placement. In opposition to this, those that believed they used psychology tactics consciously within campaign were interview participants, who were all senior practitioners. These findings suggest that the use of psychology becomes more apparent with experience. Those who consciously use psychology are of seniority and have considered or have used a psychologist within campaigns.

6.0 Conclusion

6.1 General Conclusions and Themes

The key findings of this study are that modern day public relations practitioners believe that their key role is media relations within their day-to-day activities. Various motives for this were recognised, a great number of respondents that worked within consultancy concentrate on media relations due to pressures from clients who judge the success of a campaign on media coverage gained. Throughout the research process, a large number of practitioners who had this view of their job role, admitted that they see the potential and need for the use of psychology of persuasion within campaigns, stating that it should be integrated more within practice.

6.2. Research Questions

In satisfying the main aim, the following research questions have also been answered:

1. Do PR practitioners see media relations as the key role within their campaigns as opposed to psychology of persuasion?

A significant finding from the primary research was that PR practitioners believe their key role is media relations and is far more important to campaigns than psychology of persuasion. The literature from secondary research also supports this with various theorists sharing the same viewpoint.

2. Do PR teams employ psychologists to assist with tactics for campaigns?

Findings show that currently there is scope for use of psychologists within public relations organizations. Findings indicate that PR practitioners believe that there is no desire to employ a psychologist; their own skills are adequate enough to understand and engage with audiences.

3. Are there certain PR sectors that are more likely to use psychology of persuasion rather than media relations?

The findings implicate that psychology is relevant to only some areas. These were (in descending order); consumer, public sector, health, social marketing, business to business and entertainment.

4. What psychological tactics are currently in use within PR campaigns?

This study has revealed various psychology tactics that are currently used in practice consciously and unconsciously (see 5.4 for full results). Conscious tactics included technique of communication and repetition of key messages.

Unconscious tactics were identified as relationships with key journalists and CSR programmes.

5. Are PR practitioners aware that they are using psychological tactics when implementing campaigns?

The majority of those who admitted using psychology tactics unconsciously during activity were all students who had completed a year-in-industry. In opposition to this, those that believed they used psychology tactics consciously within campaigns were all senior practitioners. This suggests that the use of psychology becomes more apparent with experience.

6.3 Research Aim

The research aim has been met by connecting viewpoints from the literature review and primary research to expose significant findings.

The study finds considerable evidence to suggest that the use of psychology becomes more apparent with experience. In general, respondents held a very strong view that their key role is media relations. This also suggests that public relations practitioners do not consciously use psychology tactics within their day-to-day activities as they are likely to use psychology of persuasion within all communications to press.

6.6 Research Use for Practitioners

Research findings were consistent with the literature review in terms of confirming that PR practitioners view their key role as media relations, psychology of persuasion is inferior to this. However, respondents see psychology as part of their activity, admitting that they see the potential and need for the use of psychology of persuasion within campaigns, stating that it should be integrated more within practice.

The importance for psychology within public relations has been highlighted within this study but is highly dominated by media relations. This leads to the hypothesis that 'psychology of persuasion is integral to any public relations activity, particularly within planning stages, when used conscious or unconsciously, but must be supported by other activities such as media relations. Psychology of persuasion is vital to reaching audiences effectively'

6.7 Opportunities for Future Research

Due to research limitations of time, money and sample sizes, a series further research would be important to build on the findings of this study. Further research could include a larger survey to strengthen conclusions from this study or by examining case studies to investigate the psychological tactics employed by PR practitioners within campaigns.

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