

**The Portrayal of Public Relations Practitioners:  
A Content Analysis of Television and Film**

by

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## Abstract

This study was conducted using content analysis of four films and two television shows. It examined the portrayals of public relations practitioners of the above sample to look for positive or negative portrayals. It also examined the functions of event planner or planning and management, among the portrayals. The results show that a positive portrayal of public relations practitioners is twice that of the negative portrayals, with the management function displayed twice as often as the event planner or planning function. Although these results are significant, it also found an unexpectedly high neutral portrayal, exceeding the combined number of positive and negative portrayals. Suggestions for future follow-up research in this area are presented.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	ii
Acknowledgments .....	iii
Introduction .....	1
Review of Literature .....	4
Social Reaction (Labeling) Theory .....	5
Media Influence of Terminology and Professions .....	6
Defining Public Relations .....	10
The Rise of Public Relations Practitioners .....	14
Media Portrayals of Public Relations and Similar Studies .....	15
Women in Public Relations .....	20
Hypothesis and Research Questions .....	23
Methodology .....	24
Content Analysis .....	25
Sampling .....	26
Recording Unit .....	31
Context Unit .....	32
Reliability .....	32
Validity .....	33

Coding Instrument .....	33
Data Analysis .....	35
Results of the Content Analysis .....	37
Hypothesis Results .....	37
Research Question Results .....	38
Discussion and Conclusion .....	42
Implications .....	43
Conclusions .....	48
Summary, Limitations, and Future Directions .....	50
References .....	53
Appendix .....	59
Codebook .....	60
Questionnaire for Coding Content .....	64

## INTRODUCTION

As a highly misunderstood profession (due to the ever changing definitions and evolution of the field (Public Relations Society of America, 2009)) it is important for portrayals of public relations practitioners to be true and accurate to the reality of what actually comprises the activities of public relations practitioners. Historically, when it comes to popular culture, the portrayal of public relations practitioners is diverse and frequently far from accurate (Ames, 2010; Miller, 1999). Miller further suggests that fiction and film are inadequate when it comes to the explanation of who public relations practitioners are and what it is that they do.

To help understand the degree of accuracy in portrayals of public relations practitioners, we need to have a clear picture of public relations in general. An examination of established definitions provides a base line for this understanding. “Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other,” according to the Public Relations Society of America (2009).

Within the academic field of public relations the definitions are found to be different from that of the Public Relations Society of America. One definition that is often cited is by Grunig and Hunt (1984) who state that public relations is a management function that consists of communication between an organization and that organization’s publics. The word organization is chosen so as to represent more than just the entity of a

company or business. Anything that could be represented or require communication between itself and a public could be considered an organization. The term function refers to anything that could be managed between an organization and that organization's publics (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

While definitions help focus both the practice of and research in a particular area, they don't reflect public perceptions of a field. Popular cultural portrayals in the form of film and television roles strongly influence how the public perceives many occupations. Numerous studies (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007; Gibelman, 2004; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001) have observed how powerful this input is in the study of public relations.

This thesis looks at portrayals of public relations practitioners that have become more prevalent in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and examines how popular culture has depicted public relations practitioners. This study will use two main aspects of popular culture, films and television shows.

The study analyzes four films and two television shows to establish what exactly is being portrayed in popular culture about public relations practitioners. The films selected for this study include *Jersey Girl*, portraying a music publicist/public relations practitioner, *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous*, portraying the face of the FBI through a media relations specialist/public relations practitioner, *Sex and the City*, portraying a publicist/public relations practitioner, and *The Kid*, portraying a public relations practitioner/image consultant. The television shows selected are *Sex and the City*, portraying a public relations practitioner, and *What I Like About You*, portraying a public relations practitioner as well.

The purpose of this study is to determine how public relations practitioners are being portrayed in late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century popular culture. To achieve this purpose, this thesis will (1) review the literature that is relevant to the study and present the research questions that guide the study; (2) explain the methodology used to conduct the research; (3) present the results of the content analysis of the portrayals of public relations practitioners portrayed in the four films and two television shows; (4) evaluate the results of the study and discuss the findings within; and (5) supply conclusions based on the analysis and offer suggestions for further and extended research.



## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to one school of thought the media hold great influence over the individuals who partake of it. According to Ellis (1999) media shape individuals' thoughts and behavior. It is this influence that moves the individuals to pass along to others what they hear, see, and perceive. Severin and Tankard (1997) say the media plays a critical role when it comes to forming meanings of terminology. If the media is laying the foundation of terminology for the general public, who then watches to see whether or not the media are representing all of their daily terminology in a true and consistent manner? It is therefore important for others to hold the media accountable for how they are representing that terminology. As Becker (1963) has stated, in social reaction, or labeling theory, labels are placed upon individuals by society and individuals in turn accept the labels, if only because society has placed the labels on them. The power that society holds over labels is strong. Thus, having the media shape individuals' thoughts and behavior (Ellis) negating labels and terminology (Becker, 1963; Severin & Tankard, 1997) is a strong power the media needs to exercise honestly. This study will take a look at how the media is representing public relations professionals and whether or not media tend to be accurate in their portrayals and whether or not they tend to be consistent in their representation. First we will take a look at how theory guides the public's viewing of media.

### *Social Reaction (Labeling) Theory*

Social reaction theory (also known as labeling theory) is one that guides how the public view certain aspects of media (Becker, 1963). According to Becker, what a person watches on television or in the media automatically becomes tied in their mind to reality. Through the watching or hearing of some phenomenon in media an individual is likely to tie that phenomenon into reality for that situation. This then creates a reality from which the viewer, or public, creates a reaction. The individual then reacts to what has been seen or heard and then takes on the mentality of that situation or phenomenon in reality from thenceforth (Becker, 1963). Although Becker tends to apply this theory to the label of the “criminal” this theory can guide how individuals think and feel, even believe about any other label they see or hear in the media. Thus, this theory can be applied to the label of public relations practitioners as they are portrayed on television and in films.

Based on the above discussion of Becker’s (1963) theory of labeling, it is easy to see how the manner in which public relations practitioners are portrayed on television and film can be a guiding force behind how the general public views the reality of a public relations practitioner. Any portrayal by media and fed to the public is susceptible to being eaten by the public and then converted into a label that reflects what the public believes to be true for all individuals holding that particular position; in this case, the position being a public relations practitioner. Thus, it is important to understand exactly what “label” is getting placed upon public relations practitioners from media in order to understand how that label can either be corrected, made better, or even abolished. The examination and understanding of these labels is particularly important in light of Ellis’ (1999) conclusion that media labels hold a strong hold over society. The labels that are

placed into the minds of the public by media, television and films are a strong guiding factor in how the public will view that label in reality.

Since the power of labels over individuals is said to be so strong as to guide those same individuals thoughts and actions (Ellis, 1999) it is important that we take a look at how the media is portraying different occupations. This study will take a look at how public relations practitioners are being portrayed and labeled by the media. To establish a clearer understanding of the power of media portrayal, we will next take a look at how the media portrays a number of different professions.

### *Media Influence of Terminology and Professions*

Communication scholars have studied the influence of media on the public perception of different professions and terminology (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Holbert, Tschida, Dixon, Cherry, Steuber, & Airne, 2005; Signorielli & Hahlenberg, 2001). Research in this area examines a number of different aspects of the impact of media portrayal on the perception of the portrayed as well as the terminology used to describe the portrayed profession. For example, in the area of sports research shows that men were portrayed more favorably than women and slender females in sports advertising were portrayed as more favorable than larger women in these advertisements (Billings, Brown, Crout, McKenna, Rice, Timanus, & Ziegler, 2008; Peterson, XU, & Yam, 2009). These results show that sports media has influenced gender and weight stereotypes. Other research has shown that broadcast commentary of college and professional football creates the terminology used by the general public as they talk about

the game of football (Billings, 2004). This finding clearly illustrates how influential media is when it comes to the terminology used to discuss an area like football.

Other scholars have examined how the media influences the public's perceptions (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Holbert, Tschida, Dixon, Cherry, Steuber, & Airne, 2005; Signorielli and Kahlenberg, 2001). Of particular interest is the Greenberg and Worrell (2007) study that looks at the terminology particular television shows impart to the general public about females and minorities. Greenberg and Worrell have shown that individuals obtain much of their base knowledge and values from television and what the shows speak to and guide the public on. Unfortunately these representations are not always valid. Specific terminology can get infused into the minds of the general public about different objects as well, whether this terminology is accurate, or inaccurate.

Russell and Russell (2009) find that the messages being spread through mass media are not always from unbiased sources, but can come from individuals creating these messages from a specific standpoint or viewpoint in order to influence their audience.

Ferro and Avery (2000) note that specific terminology is spread to the general public through television by and for specific brands that appear on television. This biased terminology that is being spread on television is what makes it key to understand and watch how the media influences terminology and portrays professions.

Influence of terminology is done through different mass media, including the reality television venue. The portrayals that are shown on reality television are not representative of everyday life, but only a representation of what it is like to participate in certain actions or life scenarios on the scripted reality television show (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg & Smith, 2007). None the less, these shows are perceived by many to be

reality. Scripted television is specifically meant to send a particular message or hold a particular influence over its audience. When a show is aimed at children, the influence can be stronger than the influence of television created for adults (Callister, Robinson, & Clark, 2007). This strong influence that television holds over children makes the review of television content an important task, in order to protect children from being influenced in a way that is contrary to general guidelines set forth by media watch groups. Overall, portrayals on television require monitoring to insure they are accurate representations. It is also very important that television, even scripted television, is an accurate portrayal of reality, as it influences the general public regarding what is real and what is scripted (Callister, Robinson, & Clark, 2007).

Portrayals of individuals on television can guide and set the standard for the way those individuals are understood and viewed by the general public (Roy & Harwood, 1997). Researchers have examined the portrayals of specific professions from social workers (Gibelman, 2004), and physicians (Pfau & Mullen, 1995), to the police force (Dowler & Zawilski, 2007). Each of these studies found a strong link in the idea of influencing the audience based upon the portrayals of those professions. It is important to understand how different professions have been portrayed by television in order to apply those methods, results, and conclusions to new or similar studies in other fields and on portrayals of other professions.

Ellis (1999) found that media can become the “holder” of a society’s knowledge. According to Ellis what the media translates and imparts to its audience can lead to group think. This group think is where all viewers of that media believe the same things about the phenomenon the media is portraying to the public. In this way, media can lead the

thoughts and knowledge of the public's opinions of television professional portrayals. It is important to understand what has been done in the past, in reference to portrayals of professions on television, in order to move forward and accomplish the same task for a different profession.

Examining a number of studies conducted in the 1990's examining television treatment of work and occupation related topics sheds light on the impact of media portrayals and its relationship to reality. One such research project looked at how television depicted jobs and working conditions for women and people of color (Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001). Over the span of the 1990's television tended to show positive trends in the improvements in the jobs that the women and people of color held. Over this same period television portrayals of police officers and law enforcement were shown predominantly in a negative light (Dominick, 2001; Oliver, 1994). Both Oliver and Dominick agree that the television portrayals of police officers and law enforcement are not typically accurate and therefore must be continually monitored in order to maintain a high level of accuracy from reality to television and mass media. Signorielli and Kahlenberg (2001) found similar results as Oliver and Dominick. They found that the types of jobs portrayed on television are not representative of the statistics of jobs in reality. They also found that there tends to be a glamorized version of the jobs shown on television. Dominick also explains that real world situations and personal contact with specific professionals help lay the attitudinal foundation that individuals develop toward professions. Television shows and media help to form the stronger, more lasting attitude about those same professions (Dominick, 2001). It is important therefore, to make sure that television portrayals of professions is accurate because it can be detrimental to

professionals in certain fields of work if their profession is represented in a negative light on television shows (Dominick, 2001).

Holbert, Tschida, Dixon, Cherry, Steuber, and Airne (2005) found that when a profession is portrayed on television sometimes large details or portions of that profession are not shown, which can lead to an uninformed audience. This half portrayal of a profession is what leads researchers to conclude that more research and accountability needs to exist on the mass media when it comes to the portrayals of professions on television. This thesis monitors how public relations practitioners are being portrayed on television shows and in film.

### *Defining Public Relations*

Now that we understand how other scholars have researched and analyzed how other professions are portrayed on television this study moves forward and looks at how public relations is portrayed. In order to understand how public relations is portrayed on television shows and in film it is important to understand what public relations is and what it means as a term when applied to the profession.

According to Jo (2003) the term *public relations* is perceived by the public as one of cynicism and skepticism. Jo (2003) stated that there has been a wide selection of definitions to choose from among scholars and within the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), which we saw in the introduction. One of the accepted definitions by scholars is that of Grunig and Hunt (1984) that stems from the most used definition originally created by Rex Harlow (1952) for the Foundation of Public Relations Research and states that:

“Public relations is the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools (Harlow,1952, 7).”

Before Grunig and Hunt (1984) defined public relations, however, the Public Relations Society of America defined public relations as a management function. The following definition was officially adopted for the practice of public relations at one of the Public Relations Society of America’s annual conferences:

“Public relations helps our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony .

As a management function, public relations encompasses the following:

- Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues which might impact, for good or ill, the



operations and plans of the organization.

- Counseling management at all levels in the organization with regard to policy decision, courses of action and communication...
- Researching, conducting and evaluating ... programs of action and communication to achieve informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims.
- Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy.
- Setting objectives, planning, budgeting, recruiting and training staff, developing facilities ("PRSA adopts statement," 1982, 547)."

Grunig and Hunt (1984), however, define public relations as a management function that consists of communication both between an organization and that organization's publics. For the purposes of this study, and this definition, the term organization is expanded outside of a business perspective to include people, places, and things, basically any person, place, or thing that could use the services of public relations. This expanded definition of public relations will be the foundational definition used in examining the portrayal of public relations practitioners within television shows and film.

The perspective of what constitutes public relations varies from discipline to discipline from within the overall profession. For example Jo (2003) states that journalists view public relations as a tactic-oriented or image-making profession. Journalists typically equate public relations to creating publicity and trying to influence the public's opinion for a client organization. Jo also makes it clear that mass media is where the general public sees the world. Media show the audience how the world defines

certain topics, even professions. It is through this set of lenses in the mass media that the public gets a glimpse into the world of public relations. Consequently, much of what the public sees as reality comes from the way something is portrayed by the media. Therefore it is the mass media's creation of definitions of the terminology that the general public uses in everyday life. And since it is said that public relations is not a profession of complete professionalism or viewed in a completely positive light (Wilcox and Cameron, 2010), it is important to find out how it is portrayed. And according to the Public Relations Society of America:

“Public relations is more than managing the flow of information between an organization and its publics. It is a communications discipline that engages and informs key audiences, builds important relationships and brings vital information back into an organization for analysis and action. It has real, measurable impact on the achievement of strategic organizational goals ("Communicating public relations'," 2010).”

Also, public relations students have their own opinion as to what defines public relations. According to Brunner and Fitch-Hauser (2009) public relations students tend to think that in their career public relations will consist of mostly technical responsibilities and managerial tasks. These same students also felt that they would be required to write, plan events and do publicity (Brunner & Fitch-Hauser). As shown here, public relations students tend to think of only a few aspects of public relations when imagining their future careers. So, to understand how the public views the field of public relations differ from those so obviously defined by the Public Relations Society of America (and also

public relations students), we need to investigate exactly what it is that the mass media is telling the public about public relations.

### *The Rise of Public Relations Practitioners*

As it would appear from the frequent appearances and portrayals of public relations practitioners on television shows and in films, public relations as a form of employment is rising both on the screen and off. Not surprisingly, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) public relations is set to see a rise in the number of jobs available over the next eight years. By the year 2018 there will be a twenty-four percent rise in the amount of public relations jobs available. This number will take the number of public relations jobs from 275,200 in the year 2008 to 341,300 in the year 2018. Most public relations practitioners do have college degrees and with the rise in jobs for those with public relations degrees there should be a correlated rise in students enrolling in public relations programs with colleges and universities. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009) With this increase in public relations jobs and public relations students, it is important for those getting involved in this career choice to view this profession in a positive light and understand what public relations practitioners do as a profession, in order to not choose this profession based upon the media's portrayal of public relations.

One way to measure the increase in public relations majors in colleges and universities is to see the number of students who are members of the Public Relations Student Society of America. As of 2009 the Public Relations Student Society of America maintained over 9,600 members, a huge rise from its 196 members in the founding year of 1968, ("What is PRSSA," 2009) and represents an annual growth in excess of ten

percent. This increase shows a high level of participation in public relations programs and majors at colleges and universities. This increase in the Public Relations Student Society of America also shows an increase in highly motivated public relations students. Because of the increase of public relations students and jobs that are becoming available, it is important for public relations students to not be involved in this career path based upon false understandings of the profession. This study hopes to shed light upon the way the profession is being portrayed on television and in films.

Through this increase of public relations students and jobs in the field it is becoming more important to understand how the media portrays the profession especially since there are so many individuals who do not understand what a public relations practitioner actually does in the field (Bowen, 2009). The images of a public relations practitioners duties are clear when it comes to students in the major of public relations or even the public relations practitioner, but among those who do not work or study in the field it is a field that is highly misunderstood (Bowen, 2009). Since there is obviously a rise in public relations practitioners and public relations as a field of employment it is important to also understand what images of public relations practitioners are held in the mind of the public.

#### *Media Portrayals of Public Relations and Similar Studies*

According to Severin and Tankard (1997) mass media plays a critical role when it comes to forming meanings of basically any terminology. This can be applied to the perceptions of public relations as well. Jo (2003) states that the general public's perception of public relations is a product of incidental learning from mass

communication. Therefore, it is important for researchers to analyze how mass media is portraying public relations.

Although mass media guides the meaning of public relations for the general public, pop culture also says a lot about terminology as well. Miller (1999) looked at what popular culture has to say in a study done looking at public relations in film and fiction. Miller looked at how entertainment media was portraying public relations and found it was being mostly portrayed in a negative light. According to Miller's findings, if public relations perceptions in the general public are based upon the entertainment representations of public relations, the profession of public relations is not in good standing. Miller also found that positive representations of public relations practitioners are very rare in entertainment media.

Although Miller (1999) did research on the perceptions of public relations within fiction and film, there have not been any significant studies in regards to television portrayals of public relations practitioners. Miller studied over 65 years, 51 books and 67 movies, and analyzed 202 public relations practitioners in the fiction and film analyzed. In these sources the public relations practitioners never seemed to be given one particular title but were referred to with different titles, one common title being "publicist." From the analysis Miller came up with a list of character traits: ditzy, obsequious, cynical, manipulative, money-minded, isolated, accomplished, and unfulfilled. Miller also looked at the relationships held by the public relations practitioners including those between the public, clients and employers, and journalists. In the end Miller claimed that the positive characterizations of public relations practitioners were found to be rare in the sample chosen for the study and that negative characterizations seemed to be embellished and

made to seem the norm when viewing a public relations practitioner in reality. Miller showed that the positive portrayals of public relations practitioners were fewer than those of negative portrayals and also showed the public relations practitioners as ignorant of their own field of work. Miller suggests that with such an obscure representation of public relations practitioners and an inaccurate portrayal of public relations practitioners that maybe the term public relations practitioner should not be used in the media samples as often as it were in the specific samples used by Miller.

A more recent study attempted to update Miller's (1999) findings. Ames (2010) found that in the years 1996 to 2008 there had been an improvement in the image portrayal of public relations practitioners in film. Ames' sample included eleven films. Ames used a form of qualitative analysis of the films chosen for her study to discover the increase in the improvement of the public relations professionals' images. Ames' findings differ from those of Miller (1999) in that Ames only looked at films, and not at fiction as Miller did. Neither Miller nor Ames examined how the profession of public relations is portrayed on television shows, nor have any other researchers looked at this form of media portrayal. Another study also examined how public relations was depicted. Lee (2001) looked at the depiction of the public relations practitioner as played by mostly male roles in the government sector.

Lee (2001) analyzed 20 different films that had not been analyzed by Miller (1999) that each contained a public relations practitioner who worked for a government sector. Lee looked for the trends that were present among all 20 films, including similarities and differences. The researcher found that there were six similar characteristics that were present among all 20 films. The first similar characteristic was

that almost all the public relations practitioners in the government sector were male. The second similar characteristic was that the public relations practitioners only engaged in media relations as their one public relations activity. The third similar characteristic of the public relations practitioners was that they practiced almost exclusively within the American government. Characters wearing uniforms and being in the military or quasi-military sector is the fourth similar characteristic. The fifth similarity showed more than half of the 20 films were released in the 1990's showing a rise in the amount of portrayals of public relations practitioners in media and film. And the sixth similarity was that of the 20 films analyzed, 18 of them were analyzed based upon a minor character in the public relations practitioner portrayal.

Lee (2001) also looked at the differences among the depictions in the 20 films analyzed. The first differences were that almost half of the films were comedies and the others were dramas. The second differences were in the titles of the public relations practitioners, having multiple different titles for the different practitioners in the films. For a third and last difference, it was found that the public relations practitioners in these films were neither good characters nor bad characters, having some shown in a positive light and some shown in a negative light. As seen in the Lee study, there is a wide variety of similarities and differences when analyzing the portrayal of a public relations practitioner in the government sector. Although this thesis does not aim to analyze the portrayals of a public relations practitioner in the government sector, it does aim to look at the similarities and differences among the different public relations practitioners portrayed in the films and television shows selected. Since the Lee study, and as a follow

up to the Miller (1999) study Ames took another look at public relations practitioners in films.

Ames (2010) started the study by acknowledging the image problem of public relations practitioners in media but followed further in the study saying that the reputation is actually better than what many think it to be in the field of public relations. Ames used Miller's (1999) negative terminology: ditzy, obsequious, cynical, manipulative, money-minded, isolated, accomplished, and unfulfilled to examine how public relations practitioners had been portrayed in recent films, what kind of activities and models of public relations were used and how Miller's categories and terminology can be applied to the current films. The analysis of the eleven films found that public relations is becoming more positively portrayed in media, or at least in films. Also, the study found that what the public relations practitioners actually do for their job, or daily tasks, is less mysterious and more known to the viewer of recent films than they were in previous studies. Ames found more detail is given to the characters playing public relations practitioners. Ames concluded her study by saying that the public relations practitioners portrayed in these more recent films seem to be showing the two-way symmetrical model of public relations.

Through past research it is easy to see how public relations practitioners as portrayed through mass media are typically what the general public accepts as the basis of its perception of the profession. Unfortunately, the impact of television shows on the perception of public relations practitioners has been neglected by researchers which is a bit odd considering that it is perceived to be very influential in shaping what people think (Ellis, 1999). Currently, a number of television shows have begun to feature public



relations practitioners. Interestingly, many of these practitioners seem to be female. The predominance of women in public relations will be discussed more fully below. While a number of studies have looked at film as an influencing form of mass media (Severin & Tankard, 1997), the research is a number of years old and needs to be updated.

Additionally, it is important to analyze films quantitatively as Ames (2010) obtained results based upon qualitative methods (which is explained in further detail later in the thesis). Past research from Miller (1999) does suggest that public relations in mass media has been portrayed in a negative light, but is gradually showing improvement. Ames arrived at a similar conclusion. In addition to seeing if the trend toward a more positive portrayal is continuing, we also need to see if media portrayal reflects realistic views of public relations. One area that we can check is whether most media public relations characters are male or female. As the following research shows, females are becoming more prevalent in public relations.

### *Women in Public Relations*

Research indicates that both on television and in the real world public relations practitioners are predominantly females (Frohlich & Peters, 2007; Grunig, Hon, & Toth, 2001). Frohlich and Peters (2007) found that public relations is a female-dominated field. Consequently the gender stereotype has become part of the organizational context. One would expect that media portrayals would reflect this trend in the business world. According to Grunig, Hon, and Toth (2001) the rate of female public relations practitioners increased from the year 1990 to 1995 to represent sixty-three and one half percent of the profession. According to Frohlich and Peters women are argued to be

natural born communicators thus well suited to work in public relations, hence the high rate of women who are seen in the field of public relations on television. Anderson (2006) stated that over eighty percent of public relations practitioners are women. With such a high number of female public relations practitioners it is important to understand the dynamics that come with those numbers and how this is affecting the male to female ratio of gender and control in the general field of public relations.

For there to be such a high rate of women, and a high increase (Grunig, Hon, & Toth, 2001) of women working in public relations there seems to be a lack of information about female public relations practitioners in education. As stated earlier, with the high number of female public relations students, it would seem that there would be a focus on, or at least some focus on the female public relations practitioner in education for public relations students. The discussion of women in public relations education began with Zoch and Russell (1991) who looked at the public relations educators and discovered there were fewer female public relations educators at the senior levels than there were at the assistant professor level. With the lower number of senior female public relations educators, (Zoch & Russell, 1991), it would make sense that females tend to be undervalued and represented in public relations textbooks since fewer female scholars write these textbooks.

According to Brunner (2006) the number of female public relations practitioners mentioned or discussed in introductory public relations textbooks were at lower percentage than the number of females working in the field of public relations. So, even with the lower percentage of females represented in textbooks, it has been shown by Brunner that those representations of female practitioners in textbooks have shown a

slight improvement in inclusion over the years of the sample from the sample in the Brunner study.

Textbooks also seem to be misrepresenting the practice of public relations. Weaver-Lariscy, Cameron, and Sweep (1994) have shown that what is being taught to public relations students in higher education and what is being practiced by public relations practitioners at the university did not match up. The researchers concluded the increasingly female core in public relations causes the profession to show larger differences between the male and female public relations practitioners. These differences are also showing up in problems in the workplace.

According to Choi and Hon (2002) having a higher percentage of female public relations practitioners than male can cause working problems during day-to-day interactions and for the accomplishments of tasks. Choi and Hon found that when the ratio of male to female public relations practitioners was even it helped to maintain balance and a better work environment for all involved. These findings by Choi and Hon make it important to understand why there seems to be a high rate of female public relations practitioners and why it seems to continually be rising (Grunig, Hon, & Toth, 2001). Considering that public relations has become a female dominated field, it makes sense to examine how the media is portraying female public relations practitioners.

The portrayals of the public relations practitioner on film and television shows needs to be examined in order to understand whether these portrayals are shedding a positive or negative light upon the profession of public relations. Based upon the preceding literature review the following general hypothesis and two research questions developed and tested.

### *Hypothesis and Research Question*

Based upon the reviewed literature, the following a hypothesis and two research questions were developed:

(H1) Public relations as a profession is portrayed predominantly in a negative light compared to a positive light by media.

(RQ1) What aspects of public relations will be most portrayed by media?

(RQ2) What differences exist in the portrayal of male and female public relations practitioners?

## METHODOLOGY

This thesis will analyze four films and two television shows that portray public relations practitioners. The methodology will use content analysis to code for the particular features that will help to test the proposed hypothesis and to answer the research questions.

To test the hypothesis and explore the research questions, a content analysis was conducted. This methodology section will address the use of content analysis for this study. This analysis utilizes a number of elements to maximize consistency in the data and its interpretation. These include sampling, established recording units and context units, reliability and validity, and defining coding elements and instruments. The methods of data analysis will be discussed in detail in the results section.

This study uses content analysis as the sole form of analysis to compare the content within the films and television shows selected for review. These were selected using established sampling procedures. For addressing the research questions, a coding sheet was devised to use in the content analysis of the portrayals of public relations practitioners in the two television shows and four films. The films were chosen based on two criteria. The first criterion is all films are varied in the demographics of viewers. The third criterion is because Ames (2010) deemed these movies worthy of a study through a strict set of requirements laid out in that study. The criterion for selecting television

shows was that they had been produced in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century and portrays public relations practitioners.

### *Content Analysis*

The research method of content analysis is one that is valid and reliable and is used to make inferences from text into their context (Krippendorff, 2004). According to Neuendorf (2002, 10) content analysis is:

"Content analysis is a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity, intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented."

It is important in a content analysis for the research instrument to have the ability to be easily replicated so as to maintain a reliable study. It is also important in social scientific research that a content analysis contains objective indicators in order to maintain the frequency of content that is being analyzed by the researcher (Krippendorff, 2004).

According to McQuail (2005) content analysis is an important factor in studying social science:

“The method produces a statistical summary of a much larger field and it has been used for many purposes, but especially for extracting from content frequency, distributions of references to things with a known frequency in social reality, for instance,

occupations, crimes, strikes, demographic characteristics, political behaviors, opinions and so on. Hence the method lends itself well to purposes of comparing media with reality, the study of social and cultural indicators and certain kinds of effect research (McQuail, 2005, 339).”

This study attempted to find the number of occurrences of each item found on the coding sheet, including positive portrayal, negative portrayal, event planning or planner function, and management function in order to understand how the public relations practitioner is being portrayed in television show and films. The reliability will be tested as well as the validity.

The procedures that will be used are first, selecting the sample; second will be the designing of the questionnaire, or coding sheet, in order to compare the television shows and films; third will be coding of the television shows and films and testing them for reliability and validity; and fourth will be the analysis of the data to show inferences and then conclusions.

### *Sampling*

This study was conducted based upon the convenience sampling of four films and two television shows. Each film and television show represents a different type of public relations practitioner. The content of each film and television show was analyzed to determine their portrayals of public relations practitioners. Each film was analyzed for the entire length of the film and each television show was analyzed for the entire length of every single episode of

every single season that was analyzed. *Sex and the City* contained 94 episodes in total and *What I Like About You* contained 22 episodes, adding up to 116 episodes between the two television shows that were analyzed in their entirety. The film and television show samples selected are as follows:

*Jersey Girl*, the film, is described as follows by Miramax Films (2004) on the *Jersey Girl* website:

“Ollie Trinke (Ben Affleck) is a smooth and successful Manhattan music publicist who seems to have it all. When his perfect life is suddenly tragically upended - leaving him as a single father unqualified for the role - he snaps.

Before long Ollie's big city life is a memory. Out of a job and out of luck, he reluctantly moves in with his father (George Carlin) back home to the New Jersey suburb where he was raised. It is the lowest point in his life. Just ask him.

Years pass and with them Ollie's plans for his future. Stuck in an unexciting, dead-end job, he sees no way out and no way back to the life he used to love. But he adores his young daughter Gertie (Raquel Castro), and she loves their life in the 'burbs. To her, Jersey is paradise.

While renting Gertie's favorite movie for the zillionth time one day, Ollie meets Maya (Liv Tyler), who challenges his priorities and perspective. He begins to realize that sometimes you have to forget about who you thought you were, accept who you are and acknowledge what makes you happy.”



*Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous*, the film, is described as follows by Warner Bros. Pictures (2004):

*“Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous* catches up with FBI agent Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock) shortly after she successfully disarmed a threat against the Miss United States Pageant while working undercover as a contestant in *Miss Congeniality* and became an overnight media sensation.

Things haven't been going so well for her lately. Reeling from a broken romance and frustrated to find her newfound fame is jeopardizing the undercover work she loves, Gracie now reluctantly agrees to serve the Bureau in the only way possible: coifed and styled for the talk show circuit as "the face of the FBI." Though resistant at first, she soon warms to the attention and it's not long before she's getting into her new role a little too much. Her new partner Sam Fuller (Regina King), a tough, ambitious agent who is clearly not her biggest fan, is the first to point out that the pampered Bureau star is turning into FBI Barbie. But when Gracie's best friend, pageant winner Cheryl Frazier (Heather Burns), and emcee Stan Fields (William Shatner), are kidnapped in Las Vegas, Gracie's crime-fighting instincts kick back in.

Not wanting to risk losing their greatest PR asset, the FBI top brass forbid her to get involved and charge Sam with keeping her in line. But when it comes to breaking a difficult case and helping her friends, there's nothing Gracie won't do.”

*Sex and the City*, the film, is described by Ames (2010) as:

“In this brand extension of the 1998-2004 HBO series... Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) is an accomplished celebrity publicist with one client, her boyfriend. Calling herself his manager, she handles media relations and negotiates magazine covers. Although she has a personal life, she is bored in Malibu away from her New York girlfriends. Too egotistical to be a PR practitioner, she tells her TV star boyfriend, ‘The last two years it’s been all about you. The first three were all about me. That was so much better (Ames, 2010, 27).’”

*The Kid*, film description as follows, is described by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures (2000):

“Russ Duritz is a high-powered, successful "image consultant" whose life is suddenly turned upside down when he magically meets Rusty, himself as an 8-year-old child. Rusty is a sweet, but slightly geeky, awkward little kid who painfully reminds Russ of everything he hated about himself when he was a child--a pudgy little crybaby who was the daily victim of the school bullies--an image Russ has worked hard to overcome and consciously forget. Ironically the kid is also unhappy with who his 40-year-old self has turned out to be. He is not at all impressed by his attractive physique, wealth or seemingly important accomplishments. He can't understand the concept of Russ' job as an image consultant, or why he has forgotten about their dreams of becoming a pilot. All

he knows is that he grows up to be a 40-year-old loser--an adult without a wife or even a dog!”

*Sex and the City*, the television show, has the following description of the character of Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) on the HBO (2010) web site as:

“Scintillating Samantha is a successful PR exec who knows what she wants – and most of the time, she gets it. She radiates confidence in everything she does, whether it’s landing a star client, getting a table at the trendiest restaurant or bedding the hottest guy in a room.”

*What I Like About You*, the television show, is described as below on the ABC Family (n.d.) website:

“When her widowed father moves to Japan, Holly (Amanda Bynes) is forced to move in with her straight-laced older sister Valerie (Jennie Garth), who’s a promising public relations upstart living in Manhattan.”

The character samples were pulled out of the television shows and films chosen. There were four females and three males originally chosen to analyze based upon the characters in the films and television shows. Upon analysis there was one more female and one more male discovered to be analyzed along with the original major characters. The major characters analyzed from the television shows were as follows: *Sex and the City*, Samantha Jones Public Relations Executive, *What I Like About You*, Valerie Tyler Public Relations Executive/Publicist. The major characters analyzed from the films were as follows: *Jersey Girl*, Ollie Trinke Music Publicist, *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed*

*and Fabulous*, Gracie Hart The Face of the FBI and Joe Myers Image Consultant, *Sex and the City*, Samantha Jones Public Relations Executive/Publicist, and *The Kid*, Russ Duritz Image Consultant. The minor characters analyzed were as follows: *Sex and the City*, television show, Nina Gerbousky Public Relations Assistant and *Jersey Girl*, Author Brickman, Public Relations Assistant/Publicist. A total of five females and four males were analyzed as part of the sample of this study.

All of the television shows and films chosen for this content analysis were released and aired within the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Jersey Girl* was released in 2004, *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous* was released in 2005, *Sex and the City* was released in 2008, *The Kid* was released in 2000 and the television shows *Sex and the City* was aired in 1998-2004 *What I Like About You* was aired in 2002-2003 for the first season that will be analyzed in this study.

### *Recording Unit*

According to Holsti (1969) a recording unit is “the specific segment of content that is characterized by placing it in a given category.” These categories are the smallest recording unit in place for this content analysis. The recording units in this study are the specific terms coded for when analyzing each public relations practitioner: Positive portrayal, negative portrayal, event planning or planner function, management function, and other (general office duties). These specific terms were counted each and every time

one of the characters playing a public relations practitioner being analyzed exhibited a feature of one of the above terms.

### *Context Unit*

Context units are “units of textual matter that set limits on the information to be considered in the description of recording units (Krippendorff, 2004).” The context units used for this study are television shows and films.

### *Reliability*

In order for research results to be valid they must also be reliable. The data upon which the results are to be based is what must be reliable at the end of the analysis. In order for the data to be reliable there must be the ability to maintain the same results from the same study no matter how many times or how many researchers analyze the data. If data remain constant even through variations in the process of measuring them the data are by definition reliable. (Krippendorff, 2004)

In this study, intercoder reliability was conducted in order to maintain reliability throughout the analysis. Four episodes taken from the first season and from the fourth season of the television show *Sex and the City* were chosen and coded by both the researcher and an additional coder to make a total of eight episodes. This procedure was done one time. In order to calculate the Scott’s Pi the percent of observed agreement minus the percent of expected agreement was divided by one minus the percent of expected agreement. After the discussion of each question a Scott’s Pi from the eight

episodes was calculated to be a .76 agreement for reliability. According to Keyton (2006) an intercoder reliability of .70 or higher is allowable for exploratory studies.

### *Validity*

According to Krippendorff (2004, 313): “A measuring instrument is considered valid if it measures what its user claims it measures. A content analysis is valid if the inferences drawn from the available texts withstand the test of independently available evidence, of new observations, of competing theories or interpretations, or of being able to inform successful actions.” In order to conduct content validity the researcher and second coder applied the questions from the coding sheet and codebook to each and every film and television show episode to measure for the validity of the study.

### *Coding Instrument*

A coding sheet, or questionnaire, was created to analyze the characters in the television shows and films. Ten questions along with one list of terms are included within the code sheet as part of the analysis. The list of terms looked for during the analysis included: Positive portrayal, negative portrayal, event planning or planner function, and management function. The positive and negative portrayal aspects were taken from different aspects that Miller (1999) used.

### *Positive Portrayal*

High moral character, credibility, and honesty are positive attributes of a public relations practitioner. In addition, usefulness and effectiveness are performance characteristics of a positive portrayal (Miller, 1999).

## Negative Portrayal

Low moral character, unworthiness, and dishonesty are negative attributes of a public relations practitioner. In addition, uselessness and ineffectiveness are performance characteristics of a negative portrayal (Miller, 1999).

## Event Planning or Planner Function

An individual that is involved in event planning or an event planner function will exhibit some form of the following attributes as listed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009): The individual will be the determiner of “the purpose, message, or impression that the sponsoring organization wants to communicate.” The event planner will “search for prospective meeting sites.” The event planner will also be actively involved in working “on-site at the hotel, convention center, or other meeting location.”

## Management Function

When an individual exhibits the management function in the films or television shows that individual will show some form of the following attributes as listed by Harlow (1952):

- “1. Develops and maintains good will of the public for the company.
2. Helps guide the management in operating in the public interest.
3. Increases understanding and acceptance of the company’s public relations program; and to increase sales.
4. Keeps the employees informed about the company and its operations.
5. Explains the part the company plays in the economy.
6. Helps preserve the free enterprise system.
7. Promotes the economic education of the public.

8. Measures public attitudes and uses findings as a guide in setting up company policies and programs.

9. Gets publicity.”

### *Data Analysis*

In order to determine the types and frequency of portrayals of public relations practitioners by the selected media Chi-squares were run to determine if a statistical significance existed in the data. The acceptable level of significance was set at 0.05. Two independent coders using the coding book created for this study analyzed each film and television episode in the sample. After independent coding by each coder the two coders then came together to discuss the coding of the episodes. After minor adjustments and agreements in coding some of the specific instances, an agreed upon set of coding for each film and each television show episode was agreed upon. Once an agreed upon set was

In addition to the original categories, the category of “not applicable” was used for any comments that were neither positive nor negative. A similar category of not applicable was added to the event planner or planning and management functions section. The category of not applicable applied if there was neither an event planner or planning or management function occurring in the film or television episode. Once the data was input into SPSS the author then utilized Chi-squares and crosstabs to determine the statistical significance of the coding.



Content analysis was used to discover how public relations practitioners are portrayed in films and on television. The results are presented in the next section in order of the hypothesis and research questions.

## RESULTS OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The study examined the portrayals of public relations practitioners within films and television shows. Content analysis was used to examine the characters portraying public relations practitioners in four films and two television shows.

This section presents the results of the content analysis and of the chi-squares and crosstab statistics used to determine if statistical significance exists in the way public relations practitioners are portrayed in the sample. The results are reported based upon the order of the hypothesis and the research questions.

### *Hypothesis Results*

(H1): Public relations as a profession is portrayed predominantly in a negative light compared to a positive light by media.

The number of occurrences of positive and negative portrayals were coded for each of the four films and each episode of the two television shows. After the number of occurrences of both positive and negative portrayals each film and episode of the television shows were coded they were then placed in one of three categories: not applicable (having neither a positive nor negative occurrence), positive (having more occurrences of positive portrayals verses negative portrayals), or negative (having more occurrences of negative portrayals verses positive portrayals).

A one-sample Chi-square test was run to see whether the public relations characters were portrayed as not applicable, more positive, or more negative in the films and television shows. Each episode of a television show and each film counted as one sample. The results of the test were significant  $\chi^2 (2, N = 115) = 87.096, p < .01$ . This one-sample Chi-square showed that the number of not applicable ( $N = 85$ ) was significantly greater than both the positive ( $N = 21$ ) and negative ( $N = 9$ ) portrayals. These significant results show that once the not applicable portion is removed a more positive portrayal of public relations practitioners is shown in films and television shows.

#### *Research Question Results*

(RQ1): What aspects of public relations will be most portrayed by media?

There were three basic functions of a public relations practitioner coded in the films and television shows. The three basic functions coded were: event planner or planning function, management function, and other (general office duties). For the purposes of aspects of public relations the two functions that were coded and were used for this research question are those functions of event planner or planning and management. The number of occurrences of event planner or planning function and management function portrayals were coded for each of the four films and each episode of the two television shows. After the number of occurrences of both event planner or planning function and management function portrayals of each film and episode of the television shows were coded they were then placed in one of three categories: not applicable (having neither event planner or planning function nor management function coded), event planner or planning function (having more occurrences of event planner or

planning portrayals verses management portrayals), or management function (having more occurrences of management portrayals verses event planner or planning portrayals).

The results of a one-sample Chi-square test were found in order to see whether the public relations characters were portrayed as (1) other, (2) more of the event planner or planning function, or (3) more of the management function in the films and television shows. The results of the test were significant  $\chi^2 (2, N = 115) = 90.487, p < .01$ . This one-sample Chi-square showed that the number of other ( $N = 86$ ) was significantly greater than both the event planner or planning function ( $N = 9$ ) and the management function ( $N = 20$ ) portrayals. These significant results show that, overall there was a higher portrayal of the management function over the event planner or planning function of public relations practitioners in the films and television shows.

(RQ2): What differences exist in the portrayal of male and female public relations practitioners?

A two-way contingency table was run to evaluate the differences that existed in the portrayals of the male and female public relations practitioners. Two separate crosstabs and Chi-squares were run looking at the differences existing in the portrayals of the male ( $N = 4$ ) and female ( $N = 111$ ) public relations practitioners against two of the coded categories. First, a two-way contingency table was run to evaluate the differences between the male and female public relations practitioners in the positive versus negative portrayal categories. The results of the test were significant (explained below)  $\chi^2 (2, N = 115) = 11.931, p < .01$ . Second, a two-way contingency table was run to evaluate the differences between the male and female public relations practitioners in the event

planner or planning versus management function portrayal categories. The results of the test were significant (explained below)  $\chi^2 (2, N = 115) = 19.685, p < .01$ .

In the first two-way contingency table that was run to evaluate the differences between the male and female public relations practitioners in the positive versus negative portrayal categories the results found were significant. It showed that a majority (76.6%) of the female public relations practitioner characters were shown not applicable, as opposed to the males, where zero occurrences were coded as not applicable. In positive portrayals the males were found to have a majority (75%,) being positive, as opposed to the females who were only portrayed as positive (16.2%) part of the time. Males, too, were shown to have a higher portrayal of being a negative representation (25%) as opposed to females (7.2%). These portrayals are taken from the four male appearances and the 111 female appearances in each film and television show. These numbers, however, tend to be slightly skewed because the male portrayals were only present in three films and the female portrayals were present in two films and every episode of both television shows coded. This makes the number of not applicable, positive, and negative coding higher for the female portrayals, even though the percentages are higher in the male portrayals. The implications of this finding will be discussed further in the discussion section.

In the second two-way contingency table that was run to evaluate the differences between the male and female public relations practitioners in the event planner or planning versus management function portrayal categories the results were statistically significant. It was found that 100% of the male portrayals consisted of a management portrayal, as opposed to an event planner or planning portrayal, whereas the female

portrayals in the management category only showed at 14.4%. Females were shown to be more involved in management functions as opposed to event planner or planning functions, having only 8.1% being shown in the event planner or planning function. However, females were shown to more in the other category than any other category, event planner or planning or management, most (77.5%) shown as other, due to the high number of television shows coded.

The results shown here provide that this study has produced statistically significant results for both the hypothesis and the research questions. The following chapter goes on to discuss the results in conjunction with literature and looks at limitations to the study and also gives future research suggestions.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Social reaction theory (also known as labeling theory), is the foundation for the importance and power of labels (Becker, 1963). It is this power of labels that gives the media such significant influence over individuals who depend heavily on the media (Ellis, 1999). Media can include journalism, television news, print news, the Internet, television and films. This study focused on the power of labels in television shows and film. The subject was the portrayal of public relations practitioners in such media.

Miller (1999) found that over a period of 65 years that film and fiction demonstrated a negative portrayal of public relations practitioners, with the degree of negative portrayal declining over time. A follow up study by Ames (2010) looking at films for a more recent period found results similar to those of Miller, with the level of negative portrayals being lower and continuing to decline over the period of samples. However, these most recent data were the result of examining films using a qualitative approach. This work quantifies the number of occurrences of different traits. The following section focuses on implications that can be drawn from this study, conclusions drawn from the analysis of the data, a study of the findings and their relevance, and recommended work that these results suggest might be pursued.

### *Implications*

This study has many implications for those in the professional field as well as those in the academic field. As public relations practitioners it is important to understand those aspects of their career that are being or have been portrayed on television shows and in films in order to combat those stereotypes that are being taught to the public by media (Severn & Tankard, 1997) in the existence of negative stereotypes that could be projected by the media. The terminology and understanding the general public obtains about public relations, and other fields of work, are strongly rooted within what they see on television shows and in films (Ellis, 1999). It is therefore important for public relations practitioners to understand exactly how the media are portraying them and how audiences perceive them. As Bowen (2009) stated the general public does not know that public relations is a professional industry. It is through different portrayals on television and film that public relations can be shown to that public as an industry containing professionals. By understanding how the profession is portrayed in media the public relations practitioner can then determine how to shape the image of their line of work.

Within the academic field finding out how the profession of public relations is portrayed can help to guide future studies and research and also the understandings of the field of public relations that might come to the classroom from students whose only understanding of public relations is that of the portrayals they have viewed in the media. As found by Brunner and Fitch-Hauser (2009) students go to school choosing public relations based upon preconceived ideas about what the line of work will entail once they graduate and obtain a career in public relations. Often times, these preconceived ideas come from students viewing of a public relations practitioner on television or in film.



With public relations textbooks often times misrepresenting the field, in reference to males versus females in the field (Brunner, 2006), it is even more important to understand why there would be a lower representation of females in public relations textbooks when there is such a high representation of females in the field (Weaver-Larsicy, Cameron, & Sweep, 1994). This was also shown to be true in this present study, a higher occurrence of a female public relations practitioner in the films and television shows analyzed which is true among public relations practitioners in reality, also as found by Weaver-Larsicy, Cameron, and Sweep. It stands to show from this thesis that television and film tend to accurately portray the gender ratio that is present in reality among public relations practitioners.

This study explored public relations practitioner portrayals in television and films. It looked specifically at positive functions (Miller, 1999), negative functions (Miller, 1999), event planner and planning functions (U.S. Bureau, 2009), management functions (Harlow, 1952), and other (general office duties). From the work of Miller (1999) and Ames (2010) it was possible to develop a hypothesis related to the positive or negative image of the profession by the media. In addition, because prior studies provided limited insight into the possible functional responsibilities of a public relations practitioner and no information was developed based on whether the public relations practitioner was male or female, these two topics were explored as additional research questions. These research questions were created to allow for finding out more information about what the public views as a public relations practitioner. This allows for the public relations professional and educator to understand what preconceived ideas and what knowledge the general public and student understands and knows about public relations based upon

the media. The implications found from the hypothesis and the research questions are as follows:

(H1): “Public relations as a profession is portrayed predominantly in a negative light compared to a positive light by media.” This hypothesis has been drawn from the studies of Miller (1999) and Ames (2010) where both researchers found the image of public relations as portrayed in fiction and films to be one of more negativity than positivity. This thesis used the same definitions of a positive and negative portrayal that both Miller and Ames used. Although both Miller and Ames did show that the portrayals were tending toward being less negative over time, their findings showed that portrayals of public relations practitioners in the media continued to be more negative than positive. The findings of this thesis question Ames’ conclusions.

Since this thesis found that the dominate way of portraying public relations practitioners is neutral it would suggest that we may be seeing a transition away from the predominant negative slant. Additional analysis comparing the negative and positive portrayals portrayed by the characters in one of three functions (not applicable, positive, and negative) found that the number of not applicable portrayals was significantly greater than the positive and negative portrayals combined. In addition, the number of positive portrayals was more than twice the number of negative portrayals. This difference in the results of this thesis and previous research might also be due to the change in research methods. While Ames and Miller used qualitative methods, this study used a quantitative one.

It is possible that a quantitative approach along with the broadening of functions performed by the public relations practitioners portrayals, provides a more analytic

evaluation of the public relations portrayals, which resulted in a more detailed understanding of the portrayals of public relations practitioners.

(RQ1): “What aspects of public relations will be most portrayed by media?” This research question stemmed from the study by Ames (2010) where the researcher looked at the portrayals of public relations practitioners based on a qualitative measure. As stated above, the idea of basing findings solely upon the subjectivity of one researcher versus the objectivity of two researchers using a stringent codebook is more accurate and reliable. The idea of only measuring a public relations practitioner’s portrayal in films based solely upon qualitative measures also does not lead to the measurement of certain aspects, or functions, of those portrayals. The analysis of the character portrayals based upon a quantitative measure allowed for more aspects of the public relations practitioner portrayals to be measured. The implications of these results is that a quantitative approach along with the specific functions measured results in a more detailed understanding of the occurrences of each function, which allows for a more detailed understanding of the portrayals of public relations practitioners. This more detailed understanding of how a public relations practitioner is portrayed among media allows the professional public relations practitioner, and also the educator, the ability to understand what stereotypes and portrayals are being shown to a public audience in order to combat or improve those ideas.

This thesis showed that there was a higher portrayal of management roles among the public relations practitioners on television and film than that portrayal of event planner. This higher occurrence of management roles by public relations practitioners in television and film shows that television and film are moving into portraying practitioners

in a more realist manner. When using the definition of public relations as set forth by Grunig and Hunt (1984) it states that public relations is to be first and foremost a management function. As this study has shown, television and film are accurately portraying public relations practitioners in a more realistic light in alignment with the definitions set forth by the leading organization of public relations professionals, PRSA, as written by Grunig and Hunt. This implies that television and film are now in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century beginning to understand and portray public relations practitioners in a manner that stays true to the reality of this profession.

(RQ2): “What differences exist in the portrayal of male and female public relations practitioners?” This research question stemmed from the Ames (2010) study, in that Ames did not account for the differences in the portrayals of male and female public relations practitioners. Whereas Ames looked at the positive and negative aspects of public relations practitioner’s portrayals, the researcher did not look at how the difference of a male or female practitioner changed the outcome of the positive and negative portrayals. The implications of these results is that a quantitative approach along with the broadening of the aspect of differences among male and female public relations practitioners portrayals, it provides a more analytic evaluation of the public relations portrayals, which resulted in a more detailed understanding of the portrayals of public relations practitioners. The males were shown to have a higher occurrence of positive portrayals than the female characters as public relations practitioners. Also, the females were shown to have a negative portrayal less often than the male practitioners. It was generally shown that the female public relations practitioners were shown in a neutral

light, having been neither positive nor negative for the vast majority of their television and film portrayals.

This more detailed understanding of the public relations practitioner as they are portrayed among media allows the professional public relations practitioner, along with the educator, the ability to see and understand what the general public thinks is the normal job functions of a public relations practitioner based upon their sex. It is important for the professional public relations practitioner and educator to understand what messages and portrayals are being shown to the public and to students about public relations practitioners based upon their sex in order to change the possible stereotypes and improve the images of the male and female public relations practitioner.

### *Conclusions*

This thesis found that the media portrayal of public relations practitioners has changed in a number of significant ways. Characters in the sample who were public relations practitioners were for the most part portrayed in a neutral vein leading me to conclude that the tendency found in previous studies to portray public relations practitioners in a negative light is shifting in a positive way.

Additionally the results of Miller (1999) and Ames (2010) were that portrayals of public relations practitioners were predominately negative. Each of these studies also reported that while the portrayals were always overall negative, the level of this perception by viewers decreased over the period for which the studies were carried out.

The work carried out in this effort was unique in that it examined portrayals of public relations practitioners in television for the first time. It also examined the

portrayals of public relations practitioners in film for the same period and utilized a sampling of the films examined by Ames (2010) to provide a basis for comparing the results with those of Ames using different procedures. This thesis showed that, along with the Miller and Ames studies, the portrayal of a public relations practitioner has become less negative over the years. It also showed that with the addition of public relations practitioner portrayals on television, the negative portrayals decreased as well, meaning that overall in television and films the negative portrayals are becoming less. While there are less negative portrayals of public relations portrayals being shown to the public through media, it helps the professional public relations practitioner and the educator of public relations students in their combat against the possible negative stereotypes shown to the public through media.

The data analysis also revealed that when examining the public relations practitioners in the two possible limitations of event planner or planning or management, the management function has been portrayed more often. This is due to the more accurate portrayals of public relations practitioners in media. This distribution of function portrayal correlates with the distribution of these functional responsibilities in the real world ("PRSA adopts statement," 1982). Examination of the crosstabs run of the data collected in this study shows that portrayal of male and female characters as public relations practitioners in television and film are different. Females were perceived or portrayed more in the not applicable category whereas males were viewed positively. Confirming the perception of portrayals of females and males, males were always shown in a management role whereas females were shown predominantly in the management role but also in the event planner or planning function.

The overall results of this thesis support the conclusion that film and television in recent times are portraying the public relations practitioner as being one that is generally viewed favorably to positively. These findings show that over the years it has been a continual uphill climb toward a positive portrayal of public relations practitioners in media. If this climb continues upward as it has been over the recent years it should, in the future years, become a positive portrayal. Having a positive portrayal of public relations practitioners on media would help to create a wonderful image for those in the professional world and educational world of public relations practitioners.

#### *Summary, Limitations, and Future Directions*

This thesis looked at portrayals of public relations practitioners and examined how popular culture has depicted those public relations practitioners. It has used two main aspects of popular culture, films and television shows. The study analyzed four films and two television shows to establish what exactly is being portrayed in media about public relations practitioners. The purpose of this thesis was to determine how public relations practitioners were being portrayed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the media. This was accomplished by (1) reviewing the literature that was relevant to the study and presenting the research questions that guided the study; (2) explaining the methodology used to conduct the research; (3) presenting the results of the content analysis of the portrayals of public relations practitioners in the four films and two television shows; (4) evaluating the results of the study and discussing the findings within; and (5) supplying conclusions based on the analysis.

Future directions for this research could go down a few different paths. One limitation of this thesis is rooted in the small sample size and could be remedied and could be extended through the addition of more television shows and films from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century added to those already analyzed in this thesis using the same parameters. This would allow for more accuracy in the findings that could be applied to generalizations among the portrayals of public relations practitioners on future television shows and films. The samples could be expanded to include 20 films and 10 television shows in order to understand the real significance of the results when applied to a larger sample size.

Also, to test whether or not the results showed a significant difference from the Ames (2010) study to this current thesis, the same quantitative measures of analysis could be applied to the films that Ames analyzed qualitatively as a new study to review the findings of Ames using a different methodology. Having used a varied and also the addition of television to the sample of this thesis is one limitation in comparing the results against Ames. Although, using a different methodology, quantitative as opposed to qualitative, allows for viewing the results of Ames from another perspective, even when the sample is slightly varied. Other ways to further the reach of this thesis and to combat the largest limitation of looking at a small amount of functions used by a public relations practitioner, would be to look at more functions of the public relations practitioner to be counted for occurrences, or even breaking down the functions coded into smaller elements. This would allow for finding out more specifically what functions the public relations practitioners are actually portraying. Also, breaking down the functions, or adding more functions, of a public relations practitioners' portrayals while



analyzing more males and females than the few that were analyzed for this thesis would allow for the ability to see the differences between both male and female public relations practitioner portrayals more clearly. These are just a few suggestions for ways this study could be furthered and added to and move away from some of its limitations. Any additions to this study to further the findings in order to add to the knowledge base of public relations practitioner portrayals on television and films would be a positive addition to the knowledge base of the portrayed image of this discipline.

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## APPENDIX



## CODEBOOK

The following terms and definitions are the operational definitions that will be used in order to conduct the content analysis of the portrayal of public relations practitioners' characters in television shows and film.

**Positive Portrayal:** High moral character, credibility, and honesty are positive attributes of a public relations practitioner. In addition, usefulness and effectiveness are performance characteristics of a positive portrayal (Miller, 1999).

**Negative Portrayal:** Low moral character, unworthiness, and dishonesty are negative attributes of a public relations practitioner. In addition, uselessness and ineffectiveness are performance characteristics of a negative portrayal (Miller, 1999).

**Event Planning or Planner Function:** An individual that is involved in event planning or an event planner function will exhibit some form of the following attributes as listed by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009): The individual will be the determiner of "the purpose, message, or impression that the sponsoring organization wants to communicate." The event planner will "search for prospective meeting sites." The event planners will also be actively involved in working "on-site at the hotel, convention center, or other meeting location."

**Management Function:** When an individual exhibits the management function in the films or television shows, that individual will show some form of the following attributes as listed by Harlow (1952):

- “1. Develops and maintains good will of the public for the company.
2. Helps guide the management in operating in the public interest.
3. Increases understanding and acceptance of the company’s public relations program; and to increase sales.
4. Keeps the employees informed about the company and its operations.
5. Explains the part the company plays in the economy.
6. Helps preserve the free enterprise system.
7. Promotes the economic education of the public.
8. Measures public attitudes and uses findings as a guide in setting up company policies and programs.
9. Gets publicity.”

The following is how each code sheet was coded and entered into SPSS for the analysis:

V1. Article identification number

Beginning with 001 assign a unique 3-digit number to each article.

V2. Television show or Film

1 = Television Show 2 = Film

V3. Identify which television show or film

1 = Jersey Girl      2 = Miss Congeniality 2      3 = Sex and the City (Film)  
4 = The Kid      5 = Sex and the City (TS)      6 = What I Like About You

V4. What year was the television show or film aired (or released)

1 = 1998      2 = 1999      3 = 2000      4 = 2001      5 = 2002  
6 = 2003      7 = 2004      8 = 2005      9 = 2006      10 = 2007  
11 = 2008

V5. Sex

1 = Female      2 = Male

V6. Character's job title

1 = Public Relations Executive      2 = Image Consultant      3 = Publicist  
4 = The Face of the FBI      5 = Music Publicist  
6 = PR Assistant

V7. Major versus minor character

1 = Major Character      2 = Minor Character

V8. Positive Portrayal

Count the amount of occurrences

V9. Negative Portrayal

Count the amount of occurrences

V10. Neutral versus Positive versus Negative

0 = Not applicable (both zeros)  
1 = If positive occurrences are higher than negative occurrences  
2 = If negative occurrences are higher than positive occurrences

V11. Event Planning or Planner Function

Count the amount of occurrences

V12. Management Function

Count the amount of occurrences

V13. Other (General Office Duties)

Count the amount of occurrences

V14. Neutral versus “Event Planner” versus Management

0 = Not applicable (both zeros)

1 = If Event Planner or Planning occurrences are higher than Management occurrences

2 = If Management occurrences are higher than Event Planner or Planning occurrences

## QUESTIONNAIRE FOR CODING CONTENT

1. Is this a television show or film? TS \_\_\_\_\_ F \_\_\_\_\_

2. Which television show or film is it:

\_\_\_\_\_ Jersey Girl (film)

\_\_\_\_\_ Miss Congeniality 2 (film)

\_\_\_\_\_ Sex and the City (film)

\_\_\_\_\_ The Kid (film)

\_\_\_\_\_ Sex and the City (television show)

\_\_\_\_\_ What I Like About You (television show)

3. What year was the film or television show released? \_\_\_\_\_

4. If this is a television show, what season and episode is being viewed?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. What character from the television show or film is portraying the public relations practitioner?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. What is the sex of the public relations practitioner? F \_\_\_\_\_ M \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is the age range of the public relations practitioner?

18-24 25-31 32-38 39-45 46-52 53-59

**8. In what town or city is the public relations practitioner practicing PR?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**9. What is the public relations practitioners' character's official title?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**10. Is the public relations practitioner being portrayed a major or minor character?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**11. How many times is the public relations practitioner portrayed in a positive light (ie: High moral character, credible, useful to the organization, honest, maintaining results for the client or organization)?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**12. How many times is the public relations practitioner portrayed in a negative light (ie: Low moral character, not useful to the organization, dishonest, zero results for the client or organization)?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**13. How many times are the following terms or actions presented within the television shows or films?**

\_\_\_\_\_ Event Planner/Planning Function

\_\_\_\_\_ Management Function

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (General office duties)